CHRISTMAS AT POVERTY CASTLE

Mr Burls[illegible] pr soner

CHRISTMAS AT POVERTY CASTLE

BY

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CHRISTMAS AT POVERTY CASTLE

CHAPTER I

POVERTY CASTLE, KENSINGTON

THE Pirate sat with his nose flattened against the glass of the window and stared moodily out into Quaker's Gardens. The last excitement of the day had gone: the lamplighter had turned into Quaker's Gardens to light the one lamp, had struggled with it for a moment, and then, crowned with success, had gone out into the world to light other lamps less important. The trees in Quaker's Gardens sighed in a melancholy fashion, and the Pirate sighed in chorus, and thought upon the past.

As Quaker's Gardens is situated in a very discreet and proper part of Kensington, I would here hurriedly suggest that the Pirate

had seen but ten summers, and was a pirate only in name. In other words, he was a bullet-headed, dark-browed urchin, who had originally been given the somewhat imposing name of Beresford, having already inherited, as it were, the surname of Merrigan; his nick-name had fallen upon him by reason of a certain bloodthirstiness manifested—in speech only—in early years. To-night he looked out into Quaker's Gardens—and the pirate in him was uppermost.

It had been a ghastly day. The season of seasons was approaching, when you were told that men had goodwill in their hearts for men, and that there was peace on earth; the Pirate, with his experience of ten years, could have laughed you to scorn. For during those ten years had not the Pirate lived in Poverty Castle, and had he not understood what Poverty Castle meant!

You are to understand that in Quaker's Gardens there are but two houses, and they stand side by side. Quaker's Gardens is in old Kensington—among those quiet streets and squares where still are to be found tall old-fashioned houses, and narrow doorways, and windows with green shutters. You come into Quaker's Gardens from a more bustling street, and at first you are assured in your own mind that you have lost your way, and that you

are in some place where houses are unknown. Cautiously you advance into Quaker's Gardens, having a blank wall upon your left, and another blank wall upon your right; and then suddenly you find the two houses, set back in gardens behind high gates. Leaving the houses on your right, you pass along until at the very end of Quaker's Gardens you are faced by a high wall. The trees which fringe either pavement are old, and cast a pleasant shadow in the summer; the place seems altogether removed from the world outside. There is just room for a cart or trap to turn in Quaker's Gardens and get safely out again; but for the most part the tradesmen leave their carts at the end of the Gardens and walk in.

Poverty Castle is No. 1, and at the time when the Pirate was looking out from a window of it into the winter dusk No. 2 was unoccupied. So far as the Pirate could remember, it had been unoccupied always. It had shutters to the windows, and they were always closed; the garden at the back was knee deep in rank grass and fallen leaves. Through a window at the side you could look into a blank stone-paved basement, heavy in dust and cobwebs, and with barred windows that held even the Pirate in check. So that in a sense you will understand that Poverty Castle had Quaker's Gardens to itself.

I want you to understand, however, that it had not always been Poverty Castle. There was a time, ever so many years ago, when a young married man—a mere youth, if the truth be told—had brought his bride there, as to a quiet, secluded spot from which he was to send forth masterpieces into the great world that waited for them. Chadwick Merrigan had been a few months over twenty years of age when that happened—and Heaven knows how much younger his wife was. They had started a scrambling, happy-go-lucky species of housekeeping, with intervals for kisses and congratulations on the wondrous fortune that had brought them together; and they had continued that sort of housekeeping ever afterwards. As the years went on, Quaker's Gardens had been peopled with four little beings who in summer-time ran about under the trees and made merry in the big house, and who in winter crouched over fires and flattened their little noses (just as the Pirate was doing now) against the window panes, and wondered perhaps what the great world outside was like. And of these the Pirate was one.

Chadwick Merrigan had been so much of a child himself, and had taken things in so childlike a fashion, that it is scarcely surprising that those other children, when they arrived in

due course, should have taken up the burden of their days in much the same way that Chadwick and his wife had done. In other words, they were never treated quite seriously—were regarded, in fact, as part of that great game of life which Chadwick and his wife had so early set out to play. Which had its comic side, of course, but was a little unfortunate for the babies.

First came Jacobina—fourteen years before the Pirate was flattening his nose against the window pane. At that time Chadwick Merrigan, having discovered that the one thing to make his fortune was to write a romance around that period of history concerning the Jacobite movement, felt that the child might appropriately remind him always of that fact. The "Jacobina" being discovered to be somewhat awkward, was promptly transformed (at the earnest request of Mrs. Merrigan) into "Angel," and by that title the girl was ever afterwards known. She was a dignified little personage, with perhaps a too early sense of the tragedy of existence; a quaint little soul, who came to understand only too well the meaning of the phrase "Poverty Castle."

Two years later came the first boy. At that time Chadwick Merrigan was taking rather an interest in the life of the artist, as the only real

life for a man of intellect to lead, and it was borne in upon him that the new and very pink baby had a brow and that its eyes were dreamy; he was convinced at once that in after years this particular Merrigan was to startle the world with certain creations of his brush. What more natural than "Raphael"?

Let it be noted, however, that as Raphael Merrigan grew up he proved to be of an indolent disposition—just a lazy, rather stout, easy-going boy. It was in a punning moment that his father one day dubbed him "Fatima," and saw to it that the name remained with him.

The Pirate came into the world lustily, and with the evident determination of getting the most out of it. He was the only really noisy baby that ever came to Poverty Castle, and the only one that ever gave any real trouble—in the beginning, at least. You never quite knew where to have him, you never quite knew where he would be found. He was the first to explore the great world beyond Quaker's Gardens—the first to bring a small alien crowd into it, what time he was brought back by a stolid policeman, whose shins he was vigorously attacking with his baby shoes. Nor was that his only expedition out into the great world; the bullet head of the Pirate had a way of thrusting itself here, there, and everywhere,

and as the years went on the family generally (or that younger portion of it) followed the Pirate's lead.

Last, but not least, came the Scrap. She was named Christina, because it was impressed upon everyone from the very moment of her birth that she was of a particularly serene and placid appearance; there were those who predicted that she might die young, in something of an odour of sanctity. And be it set down here that if any devilry was afoot, in which even the Pirate hesitated and drew back, the Scrap would plunge in, with her saintly face aglow and with her calm eyes sparkling. More than once, indeed, the Pirate has been known to draw back, appalled at her daring, and then to follow meekly, in wondering envy. She was a thin slip of a child, fragile-looking and wondrous fair—with something of the appearance of an infant Botticelli. Only no Botticelli ever had that humorous twinkle in the corner of a pale blue eye.

The Pirate flattened his nose upon the pane, and thought upon the years that had gone by; and while he thought two big tears rose to his eyelids and slowly trickled over and trickled down. The Pirate instantly rubbed them away vigorously with his sleeve, and glanced at the door, in the fear lest he might have been observed; for the Pirate had a reputation to

sustain. Then he looked out again into the darkness, where the big trees on either side of Quaker's Gardens could be seen swaying and bending their leafless branches in the biting wind—and the Pirate's heart ached within him. For he knew that things were very bad at Poverty Castle.

The Pirate remembered when things had been very good. There was a recollection of one particular Christmas-time—quite the first he could remember—when wonderful carts had delivered mysterious parcels—bringing them straight into Quaker's Gardens, where jolly men handed them in at the door, with the most extravagant good wishes for the season, and with coins chinking in their palms afterwards. A season when the Old Man (an irreverent way of referring to Mr. Chadwick Merrigan that was adopted by the family generally, so soon as each member of it could speak) had ordered cabs in the most lavish fashion—wonderful cabs that drove up to the door, and into which they all scrambled, scuffling and shouting, and chuckling in delightful anticipation. Then in each case the cab had driven away, and had transported them straight as it were into Fairyland; in other words, a large box (quite a miniature room, in which between the acts you could have games on the carpeted floor, and if you were very

quick about it startle the girl with the chocolates when she opened the door by jumping at her ankles)—there to see a wondrous thing called a pantomime. Afterwards another cab brought them home, a little tired, and somewhat inclined to lean against the cushions, or to nestle in a friendly lap—and so to bed, as someone says.

Then the shops—that is to say, the shops before Poverty Castle was Poverty Castle at all! You simply went in, and you saw something, and you brought it away with you; you scarcely wanted to wait for paper and string. And in those days Mother went about the house singing, and the Old Man was always ready to leave his desk, and to play hide-and-seek all over the house, or on fine afternoons among the trees in Quaker's Gardens, which of course they had all to themselves. It was quite surprising how a small person like the Pirate could be absolutely hidden behind a tree; it was positively comical to see the Old Man walking past him and the tree, looking in every direction but the right one, and never finding him.

The other part all came gradually, of course. The Old Man wasn't so ready for a game of hide-and-seek as he had been; he used to be locked in his study, writing away for dear life; and sometimes he wrote far into the night, long after little sleepy eyes had been closed and

little dreaming heads were on their pillows. And so there came one Christmas when no cabs rolled up to the door, and there were no pantomimes to be seen; that was the Christmas when you walked past shops without ever staring in at the windows; you dared not, lest your heart should break. It was merry enough in the evening, when black Care was shut outside in the wind and the sleet and the darkness, and when all were gathered about the fire, resolutely determined not to look beyond that one glorious evening.

That slippery, elusive thing called money somehow went out of Quaker's Gardens, and neglected to come back. And with its going undesirable people seemed to drift in—people who at first stood hat in hand, and suggested "a little something on account," and were quite sorry to be troublesome. But these afterwards developed into people who thrust in rudely, and forgot to remove their hats, and made demands. And then Old Man (still so young and almost boyish-looking) shut himself up in his study, and ran his hands through his hair, and tried to work harder than ever; while Mrs. Merrigan hid herself in the depths of the house somewhere. The Pirate found her sobbing there one day, and went out with his eyes alight, and his black-cropped head of hair bristling and caught the butcher at the end of Quaker's

Gardens. But that didn't mend matters, so far as Poverty Castle was concerned; because the butcher, with a battered shin, promptly stopped supplies.

The Old Man had been a laughing Old Man once, what time he had romped up and down the great house, and in fine weather under the trees with the family; but now, albeit childishly, he looked out into the world beyond Quaker's Gardens a little despairingly, and thought of the mouths to feed; hence his lamp burnt far into the wintry nights, and his pen toiled over page after page of white paper. Generally speaking, Mrs. Merrigan sat in an arm-chair in the study at night, and went to sleep; he would raise his eyes from time to time from his work to look at her, and to remember how bright she had been when he had first brought her to Quaker's Gardens, and they had started that happy-go-lucky housekeeping together. The tide would turn some day, perhaps; meanwhile the nights were long, and he toiled on bravely.

What would have happened to them but for Mr. Burls, it is impossible to say. Mr. Burls was what the Old Man termed "a god-send," and was fortunately their landlord. He was a large heavy man, slow of breath and speech and movement, with black hair and enormous black eyebrows, and a great black beard which

left you undecided as to whether he found it necessary to wear a tie or not. He had literary aspirations, had Mr. Burls; and it was a never-ending source of gratification to him that a literary man lived in one of his houses. He owned both houses, which is to say that Quaker's Gardens belonged to him.

His first interest in the family dated from a mere accident. It happened to be the Jacobite period of Chadwick Merrigan's literary efforts, and a page of the manuscript unaccountably got in with a cheque for the rent. It was returned by Mr. Burls with the receipt,—"with comps.," —and Mr. Burls suggested, in a note full of abbreviations, that he had been interested, and hoped to see more some day. He took off his hat always when he saw Chadwick Merrigan approaching; he watched him anxiously, and inquired concerning his health almost with tenderness. So that when that time came that undesirable people marched into Quaker's Gardens and demanded money that could not be found, Mr. Burls was a species of dark sheet anchor to which they could cling, and so keep a roof over their heads. Firmly believing in that "good time coming" of which Chadwick Merrigan so often wistfully spoke, Mr. Burls was content to wait, and to say nothing about certain quarters of rent unpaid.

In that household composed entirely of

children (and this especially applies to the elders) it was necessary that someone should scheme and plan in order to keep them all afloat at all. That someone had drifted in from the world outside in the person of one Wicks—a small general servant, with one tin trunk, and no friends, and no references except her own ugly, good-humoured face. Like one of those strange foster-mothers one reads of, Wicks, having no kith nor kin of her own, surveyed the family in the lump, as it were, and took them to her cotton-clad bosom. Knowing, by experience of a year or two, that if money did come in by any chance it drifted straight out of Quaker's Gardens again, as surely as the dead leaves of the past autumn drifted out on the winter wind, she came, by suggestion and even by threats, to get possession of some of it; and so, in a sense, ran the sorry household. She had one compensation for her pains; which was that quite influential tradespeople addressed her as "Miss Wicks," and lowered themselves a little, the better to gain her consideration. She generally contrived to find something, if the matter were very pressing; but threats would never move her. She had to be treated according to the position to which she had attained—and those who fed Poverty Castle knew her, and oiled their tongues accordingly.

Wicks was assisted in the management of the household by a dilapidated charwoman, who bore the singularly inappropriate name of Mrs. Jolley. Mrs. Jolley trailed into Quaker's Gardens in the morning, and dropped desolately into the area of Poverty Castle, accompanied by an all-pervading odour of moist flannel and soapsuds. She appeared to live principally on tea, and at nightfall would come to the surface again, and melt as it were into the shadows of the world beyond Quaker's Gardens. She feared Wicks with a great and dreadful fear, and did that young person's bidding without question; perhaps she had a feeling that but for Wicks she might not have seen her wages with such promptness.

As might have been expected with such a household, there was a pensioner even on their poverty. Some years before, in the prosperous days when money came quickly and went lightly, a certain young man, with a weak, amiable face, and with no chin and no prospects, but with great hopes, had drifted in upon them. He wanted advice from that successful man Chadwick Merrigan; incidentally he wanted food. Advice he had in plenty—far into the small hours of the morning, over many pipes; food while there was any. His name was Leopold Potter, and he aspired to

be a poet. No one ever bought his verses, but he contrived to live in some fashion, and had a plaintive habit of dropping in to meals and looking hungry.

But now it seemed that all the happy-go-lucky housekeeping was to end; so much at least even the Pirate guessed. For the storm had burst at last, and there were threats of what would be done before ever Christmas morning should dawn. Poverty Castle must stand a siege, and would be likely to come badly out of it. That day, for the first time in her life perhaps, the redoubtable Wicks had burst into tears, and had frankly declared that the game was up; Mrs. Jolley, in her despair, had taken something other than tea, and had gone home with gyrations among the trees that lined either side of Quaker's Gardens.

The door opened presently, but the Pirate did not look round. He knew that someone had come in, for presently a slim shadowy figure stood beside him at the window, looking out also. The wind whistled and murmured among the bare branches of the trees, as though it whispered of dead days that were gone; the Pirate shivered, and looked round.

"You've heard?" he whispered.

The girl nodded. It was Angel, and she

had been with her mother until such time as that poor frail creature had lain down and had ceased to murmur against an unkind fate. The child dangled a bunch of keys on one slim finger (she was supposed to keep the keys of the house what time Wicks had them not in possession), and without turning her head she answered the boy's question.

"There isn't going to be any Christmas—there isn't going to be anything. The Old Man says that if we sit tight we shall be all right. But there won't be any Christmas. Mother says she won't be able to look any of us in the face to-morrow — nor the next day — nor the day after. It's a beastly world!"

The door opened again, and Fatima came in. Fatima lurched forward, with his hands in his pockets, and with a preternaturally solemn visage. Fatima loved his meals, and there was a breath abroad that suggested he might not get them with that regularity hitherto observed in the house. He came towards the window, and seated himself on the floor there, with his back to it, and looked up at the others. The Pirate had fallen to rubbing his nose backwards and forwards moodily against the window pane; the Angel twirled her bunch of keys listlessly, and stared out of the windows.

"What are we going to do?" asked Fatima, after a pause. "You generally know, Pirate, what's to be done."

"Licks me," said the Pirate shortly. "You can't fight these people; if you run between their legs and trip 'em up it only seems to bring more trouble. At any rate, it's no use kicking up a shindy over it; we haven't exactly got to think of ourselves—it's the Old Man and the Mater."

Fatima grunted, and nodded slowly; the Pirate kicked him softly, as if to show that he thanked him for his approval. "The thing is," went on the Pirate savagely, "it isn't as if these people made a point of going for *us*; we could tackle them easily enough."

The Angel showed her white teeth in a meaning smile, and Fatima grunted again.

"No—they go for the weak ones; they make a dead set for the Old Man, who wasn't born to be bothered," went on the Pirate. "Consequently, it seems to me that we've got to put ourselves in the fighting line, as you might say, and see if something can't be done."

A small, thin voice broke in out of the shadows of the room. "The Pirate seems to be making a lot of noise; but then he always was a wordy, windy person."

The owner of the voice came forward, and disclosed herself as the Scrap. A frail, delicate-looking child, with a mere straight demure line for a mouth, and with pale blue eyes, and with slim straight limbs. The Pirate glanced round at her a little apprehensively; truth to tell, as has been suggested, he was a little afraid of her, although there was between them a very strong bond of sympathy.

"Well, Scrap, and what would *you* do?" he asked.

The blue eyes twinkled; the child stood with the line of her mouth moving faintly, as if in the attempt to check a smile; she glanced from one face to the other in the dusk.

"I'll tell you—to-morrow," she said.

Even the worst of days must end; always the kindly night must come, when one may shelter under cover of the darkness, and know that for some hours at least no harm may come. So presently Poverty Castle began to compose itself for sleep—with perhaps a new hush upon it, by reason of the fact of that disaster which threatened. Mrs. Merrigan, with eyes suspiciously large and round and shining, kissed the children and sent them to their beds; looked wistfully at Chadwick Merrigan, who was filling a pipe before settling to work again. She longed to tell

him that he must sleep; longed to whisper to him those words of comfort that could come best from her, and that had in them some sound of reason, in the quietness of Quaker's Gardens on a winter night, when the fret and trouble of the day was done. But Chadwick looked so resolute, and settled himself so strenuously to work, that she dared not stop him. One question only she asked as she seated herself near him—

"Is it as bad as you think?"

He smiled round at her with something of the old cheery, boyish smile that had gone far to win her heart fifteen years before. "There's always hope, my dear,—hope with the postman that comes in the morning, and hope with the postman that comes at night. I've been a little—a little careless in my calculations—expecting things that haven't turned up; that's all. Of course, if the postman doesn't happen along with the right letter we shall be in Queer Street, which is only another title for Quaker's Gardens under the present circumstances. But there's always hope—and just now I feel absolutely inspired. Besides, lots of things may happen; and at Christmas-time these people may decide after all that they have Christian hearts and Christian souls, and that they will wait a little before driving us all into the streets. Personally, my dear,

I have a strong conviction that things are coming very right."

Mrs. Merrigan smiled at him a little wanly, and half believed him; presently she fell asleep in her chair, to the music of the flying pen.

Meanwhile, above stairs, the Pirate had lain wakeful. The Pirate knew enough of the Scrap to understand that in those few words uttered by her in the darkened room the Scrap had meant business; he was consumed by curiosity and anxiety. Fatima slept soundly, not without snoring; the Pirate dropped out of bed, and softly paddled across the room and out into the corridor.

Peering over the banisters, he could see below the light coming through the half-opened door of his father's study; he knew that the Old Man was still at work. He crept along to the door of the room wherein the girls slept, opened the door softly, and thrust his black head round; instantly, in the smaller bed of the two, the slim figure of the Scrap sat upright.

The Pirate somewhat grudgingly consented to have a thin arm put about his neck; made no serious objection to a soft cheek pressed against his own. For the Pirate had been troubled that night, and after all the Pirate was young and a little afraid.

"What are you going to do?" he whispered.

'I'm going to let them have their Christmas," whispered the Scrap, "and a pretty fine topside sort of Christmas, too. You see, it isn't as if they could endure as much as we can; they've been used to Christmases for goodness knows how many years, and they'd miss it more than us. Besides,"—this very confidentially,—"I don't quite see what unholy bills—that's what the Old Man calls 'em—have to do with Christmas, and all that sort of thing. I'm going to have a Christmas if—if——" She slid down into her bed, and pulled the clothes over her thin shoulders.

"If what?" whispered the Pirate, a little awed, as he bent nearer.

"If I steal for it—or fight for it.

"I'll do any fighting that wants doing," said the Pirate, with a frown. "But it doesn't sound quite easy; do you think you'll pull it off?"

"I always pull things off," said the Scrap, closing her eyes. "Good-night to you, Pirate."

And the Pirate stole away, very thoughtful.

CHAPTER II

THE GREAT CONSPIRACY

CHADWICK MERRIGAN paced long under the trees that wintry night after his work was done, smoking, and wondering what was to become of him and his babies. All the world seemed very still; outside Quaker's Gardens the roar of London was hushed, and the man had it all to himself there, up and down in the place that had been familiar to him for some fifteen years. He knew every inch of it; remembered all the bright days, with the children growing about him—all the little mishaps—all the little things that made for tears and laughter, and good fellowship and kindliness. Was it all to end? Were they to go out into some more squalid place, to fight a world that would perhaps prove too strong for them? He thought of his wife; he thought of the children; least of all he thought of himself. He stood with his back against one of the trees, looking up at the wintry sky, and praying that something might

happen to lift him and them out of the mire. He would work—he would do anything and everything, if only God would be good—if only God would not fail him.

But Chadwick Merrigan with the morning was a more hopeful man.

For the morning was a Sunday morning, and they may not do things to you legally, it seems, in Christian England on that day. Consequently Chadwick Merrigan, with a sudden uplifting of the heart at the remembrance of the day, came down to breakfast blithely whistling; greeted the deeply plotting Pirate and Scrap uproariously, and took everything with the utmost good-humour. There were no letters for Poverty Castle, Kensington, on Sunday morning, and therefore nothing to worry about, and perhaps something to hope for for Monday—just to begin the week well. The Scrap and the Pirate had eyes for each other across the table as they supped their porridge; for *they* thought of the morrow that was coming, if no one else did. Likewise the Angel, who had had to reassure Wicks and to screw that young person up to the point of getting any breakfast at all. Yet here they were, sitting down jovially; with the Old Man (alas for that boyish face and that boyish manner that no one ever took seriously!) in high good-humour, with great plans in his head.

"I've got *the* idea of my life," said the Old Man, as he dived among a small pile of scraps of bacon. "Never been done before—and bound to arouse the greatest enthusiasm."

"Get your breakfast, dear," said Mrs. Merrigan tenderly.

"I thought about it in the night, and it's been growing while I shaved. You must understand, to begin with——"

"What sort of chap is the hero?" demanded the Pirate, pausing with his spoon half-way to his lips.

The Old Man looked nervous. "He's quite a nice hero," he observed. "Quite respectable — and of course ending happily and properly. You'll like him, Pirate,—I'm quite sure you will."

The Pirate crammed his mouth, and slowly shook his head. "Not if he's like the last one," he assured his father thickly. "The last one was about the politest sort of chap I ever came across, but he never did anything. He was always handing teacups and muffins and so on, and he never met a girl without raising his hat——"

"It's always done, Pirate," broke in the Angel.

"But he never once sloshed the villain or anything of that sort, and blood was unbeknown to him."

"It's the villains that *I* like," said the Scrap, opening her blue eyes. "When I grow up, and begin to write myself, I shall make all the villains die with their toes curled up."

The Old Man arranged his eyeglasses and stared at her over the bacon. "My dear Scrap, I beg your pardon——"

"I mean that they shall have lingering poisons given unto them, which shall cause them to wriggle in their insides, and to shriek and to bound about in a miraculous way," explained the Scrap, who was particular as to her language.

"Scrap, you have a horrible mind," said the Old Man, shaking his head.

"I have," said the Scrap unctuously and with pride.

"There's one thing I will say for the Old Man—his girls are all right," said Fatima slowly.

"Sloshy!" interpolated the Pirate, with a frown. "Put one of 'em on horseback, with a band of Red Indians riding like a word you mustn't say after her, and where would she be? That's my test for heroines."

"But I *don't* put 'em on horseback, Pirate, and I *don't* deal in Red Indians," suggested Chadwick mildly.

"More's the pity!" said the unabashed Pirate.

"There's too much teacups and not enough tortures in books for my taste."

"But I'm sure you'll understand, Pirate, that the Old Man knows best," gently suggested Mrs. Merrigan.

"And the Old Man's books are always beautiful," put in Angel, with a glance at her father.

The Pirate clattered his spoon into his plate, and pushed it away. "Who wants beauty?" he demanded. "I don't; I want blood!"

"In the present instance, my dears, I have a new sort of hero," said Chadwick Merrigan mildly. "He's ugly, but he has a heart of gold."

"There you go again!" said the Scrap, with a hopeless glance at the Pirate. "I never saw anything like you, Old Man; you never will improve. Don't we know before you begin that he's going to have a heart of gold and that she will love him for it!" The Scrap made a horrible grimace at the Pirate, who responded cordially. "Even Fatima has a heart of gold buried somewhere in him——"

"Which we could get at," broke in the Pirate darkly, "if he were tied to a tree, and I and my trusty band were dancing about him. Ho! ho!"

"You tried that once in the garden," the Angel reminded him, "only then it was fire, and he was rescued just in time."

"I had just begun to frizzle," said Fatima, with a grin. "I must say I rather like the Old Man's people; they're safe, and you know what they're going to do. There's nothing jumpy about 'em."

The Pirate snorted. "I should like 'em jumpy," he said, with decision. And so finished the argument.

Those two bigger children—Chadwick Merrigan and his wife—had to face another argument when presently they were alone. They had faced it the night before; it was something they had seen coming for years past—something they had never clearly looked in the eyes. Now, with this one day's respite in which they could with some calmness think of the days that were to come, they determined, with a pathetic show of bravery, to arrive at some decision. They had arrived at all sorts of decisions during their joint lives; Chadwick Merrigan had more than once brought his hand down firmly on his desk, and declared that this should be, and that should not be. And Mrs. Merrigan, smiling at him out of her pale blue eyes, had said that that was how she liked to hear him talk, and that she was proud of him. But the resolutions had been forgotten, and the

old happy-go-lucky state of things had continued.

But now there had come that crisis which had threatened to arrive so often before, but had somehow missed the entrance to Quaker's Gardens. Supplies were to be cut off; one man at least had threatened that in the week that was beginning then a writ should be issued, and a man put in possession. There was no money in the house; there was no banking account worth speaking of; there was no future and no hope. It would take Chadwick Merrigan months to complete that great idea that had come to him under the trees the night before, and even when it was finished he was not quite certain what he would do with it, or how dispose of it.

Yet, strangely enough, it was not so much the matter of the mere future difficulty of living and keeping heads above water that entered the mind of Chadwick Merrigan and troubled it; it was the coming Christmas. He had always made rather a lot of Christmas; it had been one big, bright landmark in the year—a very day of days. Chadwick Merrigan in his life had meant to do so many things—honestly meant to do them—and had somehow failed to carry them out. Some years had gone by, for instance, since there had been any thought of a holiday for the tired wife or the listless

children; the money had never happened to be there at the right time, and Quaker's Gardens had been quiet and shady, and they had had it all to themselves. In that they were lucky, they felt; and so, while other families migrated to the sea and to the country, Chadwick Merrigan remained at home, and promised himself and the family great things for the future. But with Christmas it had been different.

Little sacrifices had been made—this little debt overlooked, and the payment of that one postponed — in order that Christmas might be something greater than any other time of the year. And now on this occasion there was nothing to be done — nothing to be hoped for. More than that, disaster was to be feared, and for perhaps the first time in his careless life Chadwick Merrigan was afraid.

"It isn't as though we had anyone we could appeal to," said Mrs. Merrigan, sitting with her hands in her lap, and looking at her husband, who was biting the end of his pen. "I haven't a relative—at least, not that I know of. I believe father had a brother once, who ran away and went abroad; but I think that was all. Everybody else is either dead or has disappeared."

"We can't seek help from outside," said

Chadwick. "And I don't quite see that we can run away. Our credit is exhausted; we shall be sold up, and turned out, and—oh! my dear, I never meant to bring you to this!"

He suddenly dropped his head in his hands and groaned aloud. He had never had to face a crisis before—or perhaps it would be more correct to say that he had shut himself in his study, and had let others face whatever crisis came in his stead. But now the thing could be no longer blinked; with the world waking to work on the morrow he must face his trouble like a man, and decide what was to be done. Mrs. Merrigan (the last person in all the wide world likely to be able to help him) bent over him tenderly, and assured him that it would all come right, and that something would happen to show them that they need never have been afraid.

Meanwhile, there were those in the same house who faced the situation with more courage, and indeed with some doggedness. There had been no opportunity for the Pirate to hold secret converse with the Scrap with reference to that whispered conversation of the night before; but with that perfect understanding which existed between them, each knew that the other would be ready when the moment arrived. So that while yet Chadwick

Merrigan's face was buried in his hands, two other eager young faces were close together in an upper room given over to the children; the Pirate and the Scrap were at work.

"I've made up my mind that we can't sit still and do nothing," said the Scrap, speaking with deep earnestness. "You see, the Old Man and Mother are really ever so much younger than we are; they haven't seen as much of things. The Old Man dreams, and the Old Man writes about people that never could have lived at all."

The Pirate nodded. "I believe you," he said, not without disdain. "We know he's all right, and we know that he believes what he believes; we've tried to put him right, but he won't be put right. He's gone and stuck himself into the study all these years; we've chivvied round a bit, and seen things."

The Scrap nodded in turn, and laughed audaciously. "We have," she supplemented gleefully. "The poor Old Man hasn't heard half the things we've heard—couldn't he write a book if he had!"

"I should think so!" The Pirate was very emphatic upon that point. "Do you think, for instance, he knows half that Wicks knows? Do you think he'd understand you if you stood before him this very moment, and let him have

'Squawky Sal,' with the top note and all—*and* the dance—do you think he'd understand it and enjoy it as we do?"

"He simply wouldn't grasp it," said the Scrap, with a sigh. "As Wicks says, it's a great accomplishment, and she never knew anyone that sang it quite so well."

"Wicks heard it at a real music hall; Wicks goes everywhere," said the Pirate gloomily.

"But she's very generous; she does teach people the things she's heard," added the Scrap. "I should never have known it but for her—to say nothing of the others. It is an accomplishment—isn't it?"

Be it recorded here that the wonderful Wicks, on occasional evenings out, had attended various music halls, and with the sharpness of the Cockney had picked up words and accents and movements and everything else of various songs that were then the rage. She had brought them to Quaker's Gardens; and the Scrap had sat at her feet and had soaked them in. It was a great delight to the family to sit round the Scrap at times, and to watch her, with that placid, angelic face and with those thin, elf-like limbs, singing some raucous tune that had been made popular by a comedian of the music halls, and dancing frantically and with much cleverness to accompany it. But

that was a buried talent, and was only exercised on rare occasions.

"What I mean is this," went on the Scrap dogmatically. "We're ever so much more grown-up really than they are; and we've always had to look after them—at least, Angel's had to do that. They don't know what to do now, and even poor old Wicks is like a jelly. Therefore, Pirate, we've got to do something ourselves."

"Yes—but what?" The Pirate looked perplexed.

"I don't quite know—at least not yet," said the Scrap, after a moment's consideration. "But old Wicks, when she was howling last night, said that we should all starve, and that somebody was going to take the furniture, and that she wished she'd never been born."

"Oh, old Wicks always says she wishes she'd never been born, if you only knock over anything, or upset some water. That doesn't count."

"But the starving part does," said the Scrap.

"If they start starving the Old Man and Mother," said the Pirate, getting up and squaring his shoulders, "there will be deeds of blood. I vote for a council of war with the Angel and Fatima; the Angel will know more about it

than we do. Fatima's not much good, but he's solid."

Fatima and the Angel joined the council readily enough. There was but little need to tell them what the matter in hand was; a heavy sense of disaster seemed already to have settled down upon the house. The Old Man was locked in the study, and Mrs. Merrigan was with him; and if it had come about that those two helpless ones were discussing the situation, then it was bad indeed. Wicks had cried forlornly while preparing dinner, and was not to be comforted; she had talked of workhouses and other places that were the only hope and refuge of those who failed in this world. Mrs. Jolley, who came on Sunday mornings, had broken out into reminiscences concerning certain relatives who appeared to have had rather a good time in various institutions of the sort, until painful maladies overtook them, and they died in most cases in great agony. So that the Angel, for one, was rather glad to trail upstairs, and to sit down in that council of four, to talk about themselves and the unhappy pair they had in charge.

The Pirate, of course, was for open defiance; a sort of magnificent game of bluff that should bring those arch-enemies the tradespeople to their knees with protestations and apologies. Fatima thought that it wouldn't be a bad idea

for the whole family to throw itself, metaphorically speaking, on the bosom of the tradespeople, and plead with them; but the Angel knew tradespeople, and shook her head. The discussion had reached that point to which so many discussions come, when they were rather wider of the mark at which they aimed than they had been at the beginning, when a diversion was created by Fatima, who was lounging at the window and looking down into the cheerless quiet of Quaker's Gardens.

"Mr. Burls!" he exclaimed. "And he's coming here."

The council sat back upon its collective heels and gasped. Sunday was, to say the least of it, a day that should be considered decently sacred where matters of business were concerned; and Mr. Burls could only mean business. Mr. Burls represented Rent, writ large; and in a lumbering, half-apologetic way Mr. Burls had called sometimes of an evening, and had suggested the possibility of a cheque which might be flying about, and might perhaps fly in his direction. He had been always apologetic; and going away empty-handed had generally inquired about the latest masterpiece upon which Chadwick Merrigan was engaged, and had shown much interest in the characters. Evidently he regarded literature, from bitter experience as one of its devotees, as by no

means a paying game; but he honoured it none the less. But for Mr. Burls to call on a Sunday meant tragedy.

"He mustn't see the Old Man!" exclaimed the Angel, starting to her feet. "He simply mustn't!" There was a little catch in the child's voice as she spoke.

"But he's coming," said Fatima desolately.

"Over my dead body!" said the Pirate; and the Scrap chuckled gleefully, and struggled with him as to who should be first to get out of the room and down the stairs, and so face the unsuspecting landlord.

Now Mr. Burls, who was a bachelor, and a builder in a small way, had been smoking a Sunday morning cigar, when the thought had occurred to him that not only had he some news to impart to that great man Chadwick Merrigan, but that also he might delicately hint, on such an off-day as this, as to the possibility of that floating cheque which never seemed to float towards himself. It would not seem quite so much like business if he called unofficially and in a gentlemanly way; for Mr. Burls was a nervous man, who hated giving trouble. Therefore he had strolled into Quaker's Gardens, and was rehearsing in his own mind what he had best say when he came face to face with that creature of intellect Chadwick Merrigan.

His hand was actually raised to touch the knocker when the door was flung open, and he was faced by the Pirate and the Scrap. The Pirate stood stiffly, with his fists clenched hard at his side, and with his mouth drawn down threateningly; the Scrap stood erect, with her blue eyes smiling, and with the deceitful mouth of her a line of perfect tenderness. Mr. Burls hesitatingly put a finger and thumb to the brim of his hat, and put his cigar behind his back.

"I 'ope I see you well?" said Mr. Burls in his heavy voice, and with a wheezy breath between almost each syllable. "Is your Pa at 'ome?"

"Oh yes," said the Scrap glibly. "He'll be very pleased to see you, Mr. Burls. Will you come in? Don't mind your cigar; we like smoke." Then, in a fierce whisper to the Pirate, "Go first, and lead the way."

"Trust me," breathed the Pirate; then, in a louder tone, "Enter, Mr. Burls; follow me!"

"And make no noise," said the Scrap, as Mr. Burls clattered somewhat clumsily into the little hall.

Mr. Burls began the ascent of the stairs, seeing before him the sturdy figure of the Pirate; glancing back, he beheld the Scrap close at his heels. "I hope, young sir and

miss, that your Pa won't mind wot I might call a visit out of hours?" he said. "Of course, if you think your Pa would be at all upset——"

"Come on, Mr. Burls," said the Pirate; and, "Go on, Mr. Burls," said the Scrap. And thus guarded Mr. Burls mounted, wishing that his cigar would go out, and wondering why the odour of it seemed so pungent.

So he came to the door of that upper room; and the Pirate, smiling, opened it, and waved a hand to indicate that Mr. Burls should enter. Mr. Burls entered accordingly, with awkward bows to Fatima and the Angel; and in a moment the door was clapped to and the key turned in the lock. The Pirate and the Scrap, breathing hard, had their backs against it, and Mr. Burls was a prisoner.

Mr. Burls smiled feebly, as though he saw some childish game impending which he did not understand; glanced at the determined faces to right and to left and before him, and began to feel nervous. The Angel, with some politeness, had placed a small chair, and into this Mr. Burls cautiously dropped. His huge form completely hid the chair; on one knee he endeavoured to fit his silk hat—literally forcing it over the knee in his nervousness; on the other knee rested a trembling hand that held the cigar.

"You may put your cigar in your mouth, Mr. Burls," said the Scrap; and Mr. Burls raised his trembling hand and set the cigar between lips that were wide open in amazement. But he made no attempt to smoke.

"And there's no reason for you to be afraid," said the Pirate, glowering upon him.

"They're not going to hurt you in any way," said Fatima kindly.

"Shut up, Fatima!" cried the Pirate. "It all depends on what he does. In the first place, Mr. Burls, you have come to see the Old Man?"

Mr. Burls slowly lowered the cigar and looked at it in a detached fashion, as though he wondered where it came from. "The—the Old Man?" he murmured.

"Yes—yes—Father," broke in the Scrap impatiently. "You've come to ask him for something; you've brought your horrid business with you to-day even. You know you have."

Mr. Burls looked uncomfortably round on the accusing faces, and coloured painfully. Mr. Burls coughed, and rubbed one ear with the disengaged fingers of that hand which held the cigar; then, after another endeavour to cram the refractory hat upon his knee, he spoke.

"I was settin' by myself—all alone, in a

manner of speakin'—when it come over me as bein' more polite and friendly like to drop a 'int to your dear Pa as to a little matter of a cheque."

The family groaned softly, and Mr. Burls hastened to explain, and even to apologise.

"Not that when it come to the point I should 'ave asked for that cheque; I give you my word it would 'ave toned itself down to the weather, or p'r'aps a splash of plaster for a ceilin'. It's my weakness—that's what it is; and it's stood in my way more than you'd think. I'm too weak for a builder; I've got too much 'eart ever to 'ave been in bricks an' mortar at all. I ought to 'ave bin put into something sorfter—I ought indeed."

"Mr. Burls," said the Pirate, leaving the door and stepping forward, "we have been mistaken in you. I don't mind telling you, now that it's all over, that we've had dark thoughts about you; from now onwards it will be different. Mr. Burls, we are your friends."

As the Pirate held out a chubby hand, Mr. Burls, after looking in dismay at the hat he was balancing and at the cigar, thrust the latter into his mouth, changed the hat to the other knee, and held out his hand. It was a large hand, and it seemed to swallow almost half the Pirate's arm.

"You, sir," said Mr. Burls, not without emotion,—"you 'ave lifted a weight off my mind. I shall go 'ome to a modest cut of beef with a lighter 'eart than I might otherwise. An' I 'ope"—Mr. Burls lowered his voice—"I do 'ope that you won't say anything of this to your Pa."

"Burls is a real good sort," said the Scrap, dropping his title in her gratitude. "Burls deserves to have been something better than a builder or a landlord. I think it wouldn't be a bad idea if we told Burls what's happened."

"A very splendid idea!" said the Angel enthusiastically. "I think Mr. Burls is a man to be known."

Mr. Burls coughed modestly, and coloured painfully again. He shifted his huge bulk on the small chair, looking down a little nervously at the slimness of the chair's legs, and smiled, and seemed to expand even more than before. With many interruptions from one and another, and some explanations, and much going over and over the same ground, they proceeded to enlighten Mr. Burls as to the real position and as to that threat which hung over the roof of Poverty Castle. Mr. Burls nodded from time to time, and opened his eyes more roundly with each sentence, and pursed up his lips; and Mr. Burls, quite apart from anything

that affected himself, was deeply sorry. As the tale was unfolded, and his slow mind took in the details of what was practically the end of the Merrigans, he began to wonder in what particular fashion it might be possible that he would be involved. Not in regard to his rent, for concerning that he had in a sense given up hope; but he felt that in some way these determined young people were going to ask his help and advice.

"Your Pa," he said impressively, after what seemed a long silence,—"your Pa is a man with a 'ead." He said this in a fashion which suggested that the rest of the world did not possess heads that amounted to much.

"Mr. Burls grows nicer the more you know of him," said the Scrap, beaming upon him.

"Consequently—being a gentleman with a 'ead," went on Mr. Burls, much flattered—"it stands to reason that 'e ain't like people wot works with their 'ands or even with their feet. Consequently it stands to reason that he may some day surprise not only 'isself, but also them wot thinks they knows 'im best."

"Mr. Burls," said the Angel, standing close beside him and speaking impressively, "he may do anything at any moment. His ideas are tremendous; the things he writes about

carry us—carry us—tell him where they carry us, Pirate."

"Into depths of joy," lied the Pirate cheerfully. "At any moment millions and millions of money may come to him; he says so himself. It hasn't got to be built up slowly or carefully, as in bricks and mortar or landlording; it may come with a dash."

"You surprise me," said Mr. Burls; and then the building, practical mind of him reverted to the present. "But at the moment the millions and millions ain't tumblin' in, an' your Pa is what you might call in a 'ole."

"He is, Mr. Burls," broke in Fatima; "and it looks as if we should have nothing to eat."

Mr. Burls sighed, and pursed his lips again, and nodded slowly at the carpet, "What are you thinkin' of doin', sirs and misses?" he asked.

"We have firmly made up our minds," said the Pirate, "that for Christmas at least we will fill ourselves with goodly things; and we shall do it in secret. Mr. Burls, is there such a thing as credit?"

Mr. Burls knew there was, in quite another sense than was meant at that moment; but on that point he discreetly held his peace. "Well, there is—an' there isn't," he said enigmatically. "For instance, you may get things on

wot is known as tick—or they may look at you—an' you may not get the said things on tick."

"But suppose, Mr. Burls, you have a father with a head?" It was the Scrap who propounded that question eagerly.

"A father who may suddenly make millions and millions," suggested the Angel.

"Then I grant you," said Mr. Burls, "that matters are different. If, for instance, I was a butcher or a grocer, or somethink else of that kind, an' I understood wot a 'ead your Pa 'ad, I should say unto myself, 'Some day that 'ead may surprise you, an' may surprise them as knows 'im even better than you do.' An' I should lay myself out to supply that 'ead an' them that belonged to it with nourishment accordin'."

"And you really think, Mr. Burls," asked the Pirate, "that, knowing what the Old Man—I mean, of course, my father—can do and will do—you really think that it would be right to induce a butcher or a baker to wait his chance till the millions came in?"

"My opinion is," said Mr. Burls solemnly, "my real opinion is that that butcher or that baker would be a-honourin' of 'imself by so doin'."

The interview was at an end. Mr. Burls, feeling that he had distinguished himself, rose

from his precarious seat, and afterwards did a little necessary stooping, the better to shake hands with his young friends. Then, stepping gingerly lest he be heard, he was escorted to the hall door; where he did a little polite juggling with his hat and his cigar before deciding which of them should go on his head. And at the door he paused to whisper some news.

"I've done what you might call a neat stroke of business," he said. "I've let the other 'ouse." He jerked his head towards that house which had remained for so long empty.

"Oh! Mr. Burls, how could you?" asked the Scrap.

Mr. Burls shifted uneasily from one foot to the other. "My little dear," he said in a hoarse whisper, "things bein' as they are with your dear Pa—in spite of wot we know about 'is 'ead—'ouse property ain't altogether wot you might call a catch, an' I 'ave to take my chances of a good let when I can see it. I'm proud of Quaker's Gardens, on account o' your dear Pa, but it ain't wot I'd call a fortune. Good-mornin'."

Mr. Burls laboriously took himself and his cigar away, keeping with great thoughtfulness to that side of Quaker's Gardens on which the house was situated, that he might not be

seen by the elders; and so he vanished among the trees. And the Pirate and the Scrap, having joined the others upstairs, solemnly danced a jig for some minutes, in token of their joy at having so easily overcome one who might have been an enemy.

CHAPTER III

THE SHADOW ON THE PAVEMENT

MANY weeks before that eventful Sunday in the annals of Poverty Castle, a great ship had started from the other side of the world, and had turned its prow straight for England. Of the many passengers on the ship we are concerned only with two: one, an old man with bent shoulders and a wizened face, with a pair of keen eyes looking out from overhanging brows across the waters through which the big ship churned its way, and with a mouth grim set, as though in that far-off England towards which he turned his face something was to be done on which he had long fixed his mind. If that something were to be done at all, it may be set down here that it would be done with some thoroughness, to judge by the look of the man and to judge by his record. For Gideon Boatwright had been a pioneer in a strange land, and had had to tear out of the solid earth the wherewithal to live. So doggedly had he

done that, that now, as he turned in his old age to the land that had given him birth, he could count his fortune by something near to seven figures.

In that far-off land where the fortune had been made, Gideon Boatwright had been something of a personality; in the land to which he was going he would be no one, save by reason of his wealth. The amount of that wealth and what he meant to do with it were matters he chose to keep to himself; for there was work to be done—work that had been delayed for nearly forty years.

As he paced the deck of the vessel—always alone, and keeping himself, as he had done through all his life, very much to himself—he had leisure to review the years since last he had stood on the deck of a ship that had been going in the opposite direction. He had been a young man then—almost a boy—with his way to make in the world, and with fortune, as it seemed, a long way off. And he had not gone out, as so many have done, with high hopes and strong courage; he had gone out a very Ishmael, with every man's hand against him, and with bitterness in his heart. And the way of it was this.

Gideon Boatwright had been the younger of two brothers, and his father had been a very rich man. The eldest son—John Boatwright—

had been a persistent, plodding, mercenary man, with but one idea firmly fixed in his mind—that the fortune his father would some day leave behind him would be amply sufficient for one, but should not be divided between two. In his mean soul he sucked in that thought, almost as one might say with his mother's milk; and from the time that he was able to think at all, and to plan and plot at all, every energy the man possessed was bent to the purpose of ousting his younger brother.

Old Boatwright's mind was fed always with that idea; slowly old Boatwright was set against the younger boy. This fault was magnified, and that made much of; Gideon, always in disgrace, grew sullen and dispirited, telling himself that nothing he could do was right. When in due course he came into that great business his father had built up, John Boatwright his brother redoubled his energies for the undoing of Gideon.

The thing was easy enough. The youngster grew reckless; he had always been improvident; he wanted money. The way was smoothed for him by John, and temptation was actually thrust, as it were, into his hands. To cover up a boyish indiscretion, and to pay a debt of honour, he dipped into the money-bags of his father's firm; and in an instant John saw his opportunity. It was an old story, and it had an ending that is

old too; it is only told here because in the after years it was to bear so strangely upon the fortunes of Poverty Castle. In quite the accepted form old Boatwright solemnly cursed his youngest born, and turned him out of doors, having previously provided him with a ticket and an outfit of a meagre kind for the other side of the world. John Boatwright had his way at last; for Gideon's name was never to be mentioned, nor was he under any circumstances ever to return to England.

But before the boy sailed, leaving his brother in full possession, he made use of a remarkable threat that was laughed to scorn then, but was to be remembered long after John Boatwright and his father were dead and buried.

"I shall come back," said the boy, — "I shall come back when I have made a fortune. Maybe the turn of the wheel will come, and I that am underneath now may come out on top then. If I do, and if I come back, the Lord help you or yours, John Boatwright, if I have the power to break them as you have broken me."

They could afford to laugh at him then, and they let the boy go out into the world—to starve, as they verily believed he must. And from that time they heard nothing from him, and saw nothing of him. On his deathbed old Boatwright mourned for his son, and called

his name; but that could avail nothing then. John Boatwright reigned in his stead, and in due course married and settled down to the enjoyment of his fortune. Gideon was probably dead long before, and in any case he did not count.

But Gideon Boatwright was very much alive. At the first, in sheer despair, he went down into the depths, and came mighty near to starvation indeed; and for every day that he suffered, so did the bitterness eat into his heart and into his soul; for every night that he slept under the stars he registered his vow again to them to be even with the man who had destroyed him. A mad desire to get rich, the better to cheat those who had wronged him, entered into the man; and slowly he began to prosper.

It was a new country, and he was young and strong. He never married; and when once he had set his feet doggedly in the path he had mapped out for himself he turned aside for nothing. Men who stood in his way went down before him; he came to be known, even as a youngster, as a hard man, driving hard bargains, and getting always his pound of flesh. He made no friends; he seemed to have no vices. He went on and on, casting aside contemptuously the offer of honours that might have been his for the taking; seeing before him always one god whom he consistently and

painstakingly worshipped — gold. His god rewarded his devotion by giving him bountifully of her substance; everything he touched took that colour, and that only.

Strange as it may seem, he had lived his lonely, cheerless existence with always that first thought in his mind in regard to his brother. He would come back to the land that had discarded him; he would use his wealth to crush the man who had tried to crush him. It was his creed—his very religion; the one thing that he had worked for, and saved for, and cheated for. The bones of men whitened the road he had travelled because of that; ruined lives were in his record because of that; what should turn him aside now?

More than that, he had set others to work for him in this country to which he was returning. He had heard nothing of his brother; he simply knew that his father was dead; beyond that he had not troubled. But now he wanted to know what position that brother held, and what he had done with his life; he wanted to be ready to begin the fight he had contemplated from afar for so long. Thus it came about that his lawyers, in the land where he had made his money, communicated with other lawyers in London; and slow inquiries were set afoot while yet the man was on the seas.

Gideon Boatwright had aboard with him a servant—a creature as strange in his way as Boatwright himself. He was called Lope; and he had been attached to his master for many years. In the curious semi-savage way of life Gideon Boatwright had adopted, even in his wealth, in the colony from which he came, this man had waited upon him hand and foot; Boatwright would have no one else near him. The man had a gnarled and twisted figure, and dragged one leg hideously after him; it had been badly broken at some time or other and clumsily set, so that it was now practically stiff and useless. Report had it that the injury had been originally caused by Gideon Boatwright himself in a fit of ungovernable fury, and that thereafter he had taken the man under his protection. Whatever the tie between them was, suffice it that even now Gideon treated the creature more like a dog than a human being, and that the man, acting up to his part, was absolutely dog-like in his devotion.

Gideon Boatwright, figuratively speaking, brought with him all that he possessed. Save for certain vast acres which could not be realised, but from which a substantial income was to be drawn, Gideon Boatwright had converted everything into money; for the future his interests lay in England and in England only. He had come back to work his will upon his

brother, and upon any belonging to that brother. So, like some bird of evil omen, he landed unnoticed in England, and came with Lope to London. For he had been told that in London the lawyer awaited him with news.

It was very many years since Boatwright had been in London, and then only once or twice, on a boyish spree from his native place. He had been young then, with life a splendid thing, and the days all too short for what he could crowd into them. And now he was old and soured and embittered, and the streets of London were ugly and noisy. He was a solitary old man, with but one creature in the world who cared for him, and that a creature to whom he could not open even what heart he had left. He went to his hotel, and made arrangements for himself and his man; then with characteristic energy sent off a message to say that in an hour's time he would call upon the lawyer who had been employed on his behalf.

The lawyer was a certain Mr. Dowsing, who lived in an odd corner of Gray's Inn. Gideon Boatwright was early for his appointment, but punctiliously enough tramped up and down the quiet square until such time as the clock should show him that the moment for meeting his man had arrived. Half a minute before the time he climbed the stairs slowly, and at the exact

moment knocked heavily upon the door, and entered. He gave his name to a young clerk who was sitting in a sort of enlarged sentry box in a lobby, and was presently ushered into the presence of the lawyer. Gideon Boatwright, with his hands behind his back grasping his walking-stick and hat, surveyed the lawyer critically.

Mr. Dowsing was a little, quick-speaking, precise man, with a white face and a head that was bald on top, save for certain wisps of hair that had been persuaded to allow themselves to be drawn across it. He nervously waved a hand to a chair, and glanced at the card which lay before him on the desk.

"Mr.—Mr. Boatwright?" he asked.

Gideon nodded. "That's my name," he said in his harsh voice. "I'm a man of few words; action's more in my line. You've been making certain inquiries on my account. What are the results?"

He sank into a chair, and put his hat on top of his stick, and so sat bolt upright, waiting. Mr. Dowsing cleared his throat, and sat down also, and drew some papers towards himself. Then in crisp tones, but with many pauses as if to consider his words, he began. He glanced from time to time at the papers before him to refresh his memory.

"Some months ago, Mr. Boatwright, we

received instructions from your solicitors to make certain inquiries concerning your brother —Mr. John Boatwright. Those inquiries were likely to present very considerable difficulty, because your solicitors could give us no definite information concerning Mr. Boatwright during the past thirty-eight years. All they were able to tell us was that his father had died; beyond that we were compelled to work absolutely in the dark."

Gideon Boatwright nodded sharply over the top of his hat. "Quite right," he said. "I knew nothing myself, and therefore could tell them nothing. I left England as a boy—or at all events not quite a man; I had cut myself off from everyone. Now I want to know what has become of my brother John—how he is living—whether he prospers or not—whether he is married and has a family. I know nothing; I am expecting you to tell me. That's what you'll be paid for, you know."

Mr. Dowsing closed his eyes for an instant, as though a little shocked at the matter being put before him in so crude a fashion. Opening his eyes, he fixed them on this strange client, and spoke with gravity.

"Mr. Gideon Boatwright, in my profession it is sometimes necessary that one should impart good news—sometimes that one should impart bad news. In the present case you

have come many thousands of miles back from a country that is yours by adoption only, and your first natural feeling on returning to your home is as to the welfare of those you left behind when, with youthful eagerness and impetuosity, you set out to make your fortune. Naturally you want to know," went on the lawyer, warming a little to his work,—"you want to know that that brother will be able to receive you with open arms; you want to renew old associations with him—old boyish friendships——"

"Stop!" Gideon Boatwright lifted the stick on which his hat was placed, and rested his chin on top of the hat. "You're going a little too fast, my friend," he said sternly. "I come here with no tenderness; I have no desire to renew any friendship. Tenderness and I said farewell many and many a year ago, when I was starving, and trying to pick up a crust to keep some life in me; I forgot the name of friendship when my brother John had me kicked out neck and crop, and bundled off to the other side of the world. Don't romance, my friend; get on with the story. My father's dead; he was never a good father to me, so we won't talk about that. Now for my brother John. What of him?"

"Your brother John, I regret to say, died some years ago. I was endeavouring to

break that to you," said Mr. Dowsing, a little stiffly.

Gideon Boatwright pursed up his lips, and softly rubbed his chin on the hat. When at last he spoke, it was in a regretful tone, though not for any reason the lawyer might have supposed.

"That's a pity," he said slowly. "You needn't think," he added hastily, "that I'm sorry because he's dead; in a way I've wished for that many and many a time. Only there was an old score I had to settle with him—something I'd got to wipe off, before I could die with any peace. Now, in a sense, I'm cheated. Come to think of it," he went on whimsically, "John was always one too many for me. He's done me even now."

"I should scarcely have imagined, sir, that you would be thinking of vengeance—of old scores to be wiped off—after hearing such news as that." Mr. Dowsing was very properly indignant.

"Ah! you don't understand," said the old man, nodding his head slowly. "You don't understand what my life has been, or what I've suffered. You men who sit in comfortable arm-chairs, and read of what the world is, and shake your heads over the wickedness by which you live—what do you know of storm and stress and struggle? I've been through it:

I've been landed almost naked in a country that was hostile to me; I've snatched the bread from men's mouths that I might live myself; I've fought every step of the way—and it has tired me, and saddened me; it would have broken a weaker man. I've lain down with the beasts of the fields—beasts that I tended—to sleep, while my brother John lay in his comfortable bed at home. I've toiled at coarse labour under burning suns, and with the rain drenching me; I've lived with the scum of the earth—and I've come out on top. I might have lived cleanly and quietly and comfortably — but for my brother John; I might have had a home such as other men have—but for my brother John; I've waited nearly forty years to pay him back—and he's slipped out of my reach. That's why I say it's a pity."

As he sat there, with his rugged, stern old face turned to the lawyer, it seemed as though in that quiet room something of the very atmosphere of stress and storm and hard fighting of which he spoke was about the man. He had come through it all triumphant, and he had come through it all alone; and his vengeance, as it seemed, was a thing that death had snatched from him. He had toiled for that; had ground men hard, in his own way, for that; had lived unloved for that; and all to

no purpose. He shrugged his shoulders, and turned again to Dowsing.

"Well, I want to know about his life. I want to know how he lived, and if he married, and if he had children. I want to know everything."

Mr. Dowsing referred again to his papers; but now Gideon Boatwright seemed at first to listen listlessly enough.

"It appears that your brother married very soon after you left England—or at all events within a few years—and had issue one daughter. She was named Mary."

"My mother's name," muttered Gideon Boatwright.

"Mary Boatwright was born some thirty-four years ago, and is alive," said Mr. Dowsing.

"Alive?" Gideon pricked up his ears, and pursed his lips afresh.

"We have had very considerable difficulty in tracing her, because she had in a sense disappeared," said Mr. Dowsing. "At a comparatively early age—when she was about nineteen—she married, and at the present time has four children. She married, as I understand,"—Mr. Dowsing was peering about among the papers frowningly,—"she married a certain Chadwick Merrigan."

"Never heard of him," said the old man

sourly. "Well, what else? Are they living still at the old place? Are they prosperous?"

"The old place, as you term it, exists no longer, Mr. Gideon Boatwright. The firm of Boatwright and Company failed years ago, before the death of your brother; John Boatwright was practically a pauper when he died." Mr. Dowsing arranged his eyeglasses on his nose and looked over the top of them at his client.

For what seemed a long time Gideon Boatwright was silent; he seemed to be studying the pattern of the carpet on which his squarely set feet were resting. Then, as before, he nodded slowly, and gave a sort of grim laugh.

"John's way," he said. "Just John's way. I thought I'd come back and try conclusions with him; I thought I'd set my wealth against his; I meant to smash him. He's gone—and his wealth too. Just John's way."

"Your brother's daughter — Mary Boatwright—married a man as poor as herself," went on Mr. Dowsing. "He is a writer—a man who earns a precarious livelihood with novels and stories, and idle things of that sort." Mr. Dowsing, being himself in a snug profession, was careful to emphasise

his dislike of anything approaching to precariousness.

"He is—is he?" Gideon Boatwright seemed to be considering something. "Yet I suppose he makes something of a living for himself and—how many children did you say?"

"There are four children," said Dowsing. "From inquiries I have made, I find that your brother's daughter and her husband and family are in very low water indeed, and have been for some time past. They have made a very brave struggle, I believe, but the odds have been against them. I should say that they are at the present time as poor as you were, Mr. Boatwright, when you started for the other side of the world. Perhaps even poorer."

The words were unfortunate, addressed to Gideon Boatwright at that time. He was smarting under his disappointment; he was remembering with bitterness how the vengeance he had brooded on for years had been snatched away from him. Now suddenly he began to understand that it might happen after all that that vengeance still lay ready to his hand; that not even John Boatwright, who had died destitute, could quite cheat him in the end. He suddenly hitched his chair nearer to the lawyer's desk, and laid his hat and stick on that desk,

and folded his arms, and looked at Dowsing with new interest.

"John Boatwright's daughter in something the same position that I was when John Boatwright had me kicked out into the world to earn my living; in other words, to starve and fight and adopt every mean shift that a man does to keep body and soul together, among strangers in a strange land. That sounds good; that's very good. John Boatwright's daughter married to a man who hasn't any money and is in difficulties; John Boatwright's grandchildren likely to have a difficult fight with the world. That's excellent!"

"I'm afraid I don't understand," said Mr. Dowsing.

"I'll explain," said Gideon grimly. "I come back, after all these years, to find that Fate, not always so unfair as people think, has played into my hands. The wrong they did me has recoiled upon them to an extent; it shall recoil yet more. They're not low enough, until they sleep under the sky—until they eat the bread they have to beg from others—until they come down to what *I* was" —he struck himself fiercely on the breast— "when my life should have been fair and straight before me. I won't be cheated of that which I have made up my mind to do

through all these years: John Boatwright shall turn in his grave, if by chance he can understand what I mean to do. In low water, are they? By the Lord, any kith or kin of his shall be in something worse than low water before I've done with 'em!"

Mr. Dowsing—a little troubled, to do him justice—raised his eyebrows and looked at his client, and then, with a shrug, turned again to his papers. After all, it was nothing to him what this morose madman might care to do; the lawyer's task was finished. He had found the people he had been paid to find; anything else did not concern him. Whatever retort was on his lips was checked by the remembrance that he was a man of law first, and a man of heart secondly.

"I have nothing to do with any scheme that may be in your mind, Mr. Boatwright," he said after a pause. "It is simply my duty to tell you that I have found these people, and that I can tell you exactly where they are living."

"You shall do more than that," exclaimed Gideon Boatwright, starting to his feet, and taking up his hat and stick. "Your work isn't done yet by a long chalk. You shall take me to the place; you shall show me where they live—show me the people themselves, if possible."

"This is a very busy day with me," said Mr. Dowsing, fumbling among his papers. "I can give you the address, or I can send a clerk with you. But I fear——"

"It's been my rule of life, my friend, that when I pay a man to do a thing I see that he does it," said Gideon Boatwright grimly. "You'll be paid everything and anything you ask; you need have no fear of that. But I don't deal with understrappers; I deal with principals. Consequently, I want you to go at once with me to this place, wherever it is, and show me yourself what you have discovered. I presume, of course, that you have conducted inquiries yourself, and have not left *those* to understrappers?"

"I have myself visited the place where these people live; I have seen John Boatwright's daughter—and her children. Perhaps I ought to add," he went on hastily, "that the inquiries have been conducted quite confidentially, and the people do not even know that they have been—shall I say watched?"

"Good!" Gideon Boatwright nodded with some satisfaction. "That makes it all the easier for you and for me. If you'll send for a cab, we'll go at once, if it isn't too far."

Mr. Dowsing began to feel that all this was so far outside the ordinary humdrum course

of his business that it was by way of being distinctly interesting. Therefore, quite meekly, he sent for a cab, and drove with Gideon Boatwright to Quaker's Gardens, Kensington. The two men arrived together in the late afternoon as the dusk was falling; and so for the first time Gideon looked upon Poverty Castle, through a mist of driving sleet. He did not seem to mind that in the least; he stood under the trees, looking at the house for a long time in silence. And presently made a discovery.

'Why, there's another house there, joined to it. Empty—and to let."

"It has been empty for many years, I believe," said the lawyer. "It is not a very desirable property, and would in all probability want a lot of doing up. Both houses belong to a builder in the neighbourhood."

"Look here, Dowsing," said the other, turning to him suddenly and tapping him on the breast with a forefinger, "I'll take that house."

"My dear sir——"

"Don't argue," snapped Gideon. "When I say a thing I mean it; that's how I've made my money—by always knowing my own mind. If you don't care to undertake the business, I can employ somebody else, you know."

"My dear Mr. Boatwright," protested Dowsing, "I am not suggesting that I will not act for you. I was only going to suggest that the house will be in a disreputable state, and that I doubt very much if it would suit a person of your wealth and position."

"Never mind my wealth and position," retorted Gideon Boatwright. "I mean to have that house, if I have to buy the pair of 'em to do it. Now, where's this builder fellow? I want to get the thing completed."

"He lives practically just round the corner; a man named Burls," said Mr. Dowsing. And then, suddenly laying a hand on the other's arm, he drew Gideon Boatwright back among the shadows of the trees. "Look there!" he whispered. "She's just coming out of the house."

Gideon Boatwright looked, and saw the door of Poverty Castle open and Mary Merrigan come out. She faced the driving sleet bravely; she had no eyes for the two men drawn up under the trees watching her. She glanced at them casually for a moment as she went past, but they were nothing to her.

Gideon drew a long breath when she had turned the corner and disappeared from sight. "I should have known her anywhere," he said. "She's got John's eyes and John's look. That

settles the matter; I'll have that house, if I have to buy all Kensington."

"And what will you do then?" asked Mr. Dowsing.

"I don't know; time enough to settle that when I'm in the place. Now for your builder."

They found Mr. Burls shutting up for the night, in an odour of paint-pots and sawdust. Mr. Burls was a little gratified and a little astonished to find that someone actually wanted to take that other house in Quaker's Gardens; yet he was a little suspicious too. For Gideon Boatwright, in his eagerness, waved aside any suggestion as to the place being repaired; he had been used to roughing it, and he was quite content to take it as it was. It was watertight, and it could be cleaned down sufficiently for his use in a day by a charwoman; he would get what furniture was required himself. The bargain was almost completed when he made a remark that caused Mr. Burls to look at him curiously.

"You've got some people in the next house; what sort are they?"

"Of the very 'ighest," said Mr. Burls complacently. "You need 'ave no fear, sir, as to your neighbours; I'm rather proud to know that they live there at all."

"Do they pay you well?" Gideon Boatwright literally snapped the question at him.

"That's as may be," said Mr. Burls, with a glance from one man to the other. "An' in any case it's nobody's business but theirs an' mine."

"I suggest to you, Burls, that they are very considerably behindhand with their rent," said Dowsing.

Mr. Burls slowly picked up a shaving, and put one end of it between his teeth and thoughtfully chewed it. "There are them in this world as pays, and there are them that don't pay," he said deliberately. "Likewise there are them that can't pay, an' them that wouldn't pay if they could. W'ich is logic." He puffed out a morsel of shaving, and resumed the question of business. "You was sayin' you wanted the 'ouse; you can 'ave it."

Gideon Boatwright glanced at the lawyer; then turned again to Mr. Burls. "Look here," he said, "I'll buy 'em both at your own price. I'll take 'em off your hands."

"What for?" asked Mr. Burls. "They ain't a good property, or a payin' property—an' you don't look the sort of man that 'd buy anything that didn't pay."

"It's a fancy—a whim," said Gideon impatiently. "Come—what's your price?"

"They ain't for sale," said Burls doggedly.

"You can 'ave the other one, or you can leave it; but they ain't for sale."

With that Gideon Boatwright had to be contented, for Burls would not alter his determination. The bargain having been struck, Gideon Boatwright and the lawyer went away; and Gideon Boatwright said what was in his mind.

"They owe that fellow money—and he's on their side," he said. "I'm certain of it; I was certain of it the moment he began to speak about them. I wish I could have got hold of both houses; that would have given me a power I haven't got yet. However, here's one step gained; I shall be next to them, with only a party wall intervening. In low water, didn't you say? Well, it shall go hard if they don't spend their Christmas in the streets!"

Within a few days some furniture arrived, and soon afterwards came an old man of a grimly set face, and with eyes that peered out sharply under overhanging brows; and with him was a gnarled and twisted-looking man, who dragged one leg stiffly and painfully after him as he walked.

And Quaker's Gardens was changed. For at intervals during the day, and at night after the stars were out, the children, peeping from the windows into that place that had been their

playground for so many years, saw those two figures pacing up and down—the lame man always a little behind the other—backwards and forwards under the trees. A shadow had fallen upon the place, and as it seemed had fallen almost upon them.

CHAPTER IV

CONTAINS THE WHOLE ART OF LIVING

THE morning was breaking chill and grey in Quaker's Gardens, and Gideon Boatwright sat up on his small camp bedstead, with the bedclothes drawn up under his chin, and looked about him. The walls of the room were bare of pictures or of ornaments; only a couple of chairs and a small dressing-table and washstand were in the room. This was the home that for the present at least was his —the sorry place to which the hope of his revenge had brought him, after all the toilsome years. He looked out through the uncurtained window (for there was no one opposite to watch his movements) and thought grimly what it would be like to be homeless at such a time as this—homeless in the streets. Well, he had been homeless; he might have died all those years before for anything that anyone cared. And within a few feet of him almost, with only a wall between, slept the daughter

of that John Boatwright who had wronged him, with her husband and some wretched brats of children.

He chuckled to think what their feelings would be if they knew who he was, and how near he was. They were not likely to know until the proper time came; he had given Burls instructions that his name was not to be mentioned to anyone—that he desired for the present to live quietly and unknown.

"You won't cheat me, John Boatwright, even though you are dead," he muttered to himself. "I'll make it worth the waiting for; and after all it will be easier than if I had found any of them really prosperous. The thing has been done for me—or perhaps left for me to finish. I can sit still, and watch the game going on, and enjoy it at my leisure. It'll be as good as a play."

He shivered in the cheerless room, and presently rolled out of bed, and made for the door and opened it. There he shouted sharply twice into the dimness of the house—

"Lope! Lope!"

There was a sound of someone moving in the house, and presently the stumbling feet of the lame man upon the stairs. Gideon Boatwright got back into bed, and sat there in his former attitude, waiting for the man to come. When Lope at last came into the room, in his

shambling, awkward fashion, he found his master staring at him over that barrier of bedclothes. Lope waited just within the door, propping himself sullenly against the wall, and eyeing Gideon sideways, like some ill-conditioned dog expecting a blow.

"Is breakfast ready?" demanded Gideon.

"In about half an hour," said the man, in a curiously subdued voice. "I was getting it when you called."

Gideon Boatwright, watching the man in an apathetic fashion, seemed on the point of speaking on some other subject, when he changed his mind. "See that you're not late with it, or I'll break every bone in your body," he said.

It seemed not so much a threat as an ordinary mode of speech from master to man; at all events, Lope took no notice of it, but turned and shambled out of the room. Gideon got out of bed, and proceeded to dress—washing himself in Spartan fashion, and with great noise of splashing and blowing, in ice-cold water. Then he descended, and took his place at a table in another cheerless room, where Lope waited on him. Here a fire had been lighted, and the table was drawn up near to it. The food was coarsely cooked and served, but was smoking hot; and Gideon ate with an appetite.

"Well, how do you like your quarters?" snapped the master, after an interval of silence.

The man shrugged his shoulders, and bared his teeth at one side in a grin—again with that curious resemblance to an animal. "All quarters are alike to me," he replied. "Where you are I am. Hasn't it always been so?"

"For a good many years now, certainly," said Gideon thoughtfully. "I suppose you've known on which side your bread was buttered, or you wouldn't have stuck to me. No man ever sticks to another in this world unless there's something to be got out of that other—or unless the one is afraid of the other."

Again silence for a time, while the one man took his food and the other watched. Then again Gideon Boatwright looked up and spoke.

"There was a devil of a noise in this place last night," he said. "You might have thought the house was coming down. Was it those brats next door?"

Lope nodded. "You heard it through the wall," he said. "Children's voices."

He spoke in so strange a tone that Gideon Boatwright glanced up at him quickly again, with a frown upon his face. "Why, what are children's voices to you?" he demanded roughly.

The man spread out his knotted hands as if in a mute apology. "Nothing—nothing at all," he answered. "What should they be? What have I ever known of children?"

"Of course not," said Gideon slowly, still watching the other, whose head was bent. "What should you know about children? You didn't happen by any chance ever to know anything about them when you were younger—before I found you in the gutter—eh?"

The man curved an arm before his eyes for a moment, and held it there; then dropped it, and sidled to the fireplace, on the pretence of mending the fire. "No—no," he said unsteadily. "What should I know about them, master?" He was still bent over the fire, busy with it. "Only when the voices and the laughter sounded last night——" His voice trailed off, and was lost in the noise he made in stirring the coals.

"Bah!" Gideon Boatwright rose from the table noisily. "Don't talk rubbish. And just clear those things away."

The man obeyed, and Gideon waited, pacing about the room and watching him. In all the years that they had been together this creature had never displayed any emotion—had seemed a mere dumb patient thing, to be kicked or cuffed or sworn at just as the mood took his

master. The fact that he should speak in that fashion concerning the children was disturbing, in a vague way, especially when Gideon remembered what he had made up his mind to do in regard to those children. This creature, who should have been loyal to him and any designs of his, seemed almost to be turning from him. After stalking about uneasily for a time, he stopped, and spoke again.

"Have you found out anything about them at all? Do you know anything?"

"They're very poor," said Lopé, without raising his head, as he went on moving the dishes from the table.

"Blockhead!—I knew that already. But are they getting supplies? Is anyone helping them?"

The man shook his head. "I don't know," he said, with something of doggedness.

"It's your business to know; what the devil do you suppose I keep you for?" snapped Gideon. "You've got to worm your way into their secrets—find out all about 'em—and bring your knowledge to me. Do you understand?"

"Yes—I understand," said the man.

Again looking at him distrustfully, Gideon went out of the room, and began a tour of the house; going through the empty rooms, and opening old cupboards and peering about here

and there. He ascended in due course to the attics, and began rummaging about in corners, and opening windows, and thrusting his ugly head out into the cold morning air; perhaps he was striving to get a glimpse of the house next door. And, so peering about, presently made a discovery.

A short corridor divided the two attics, and at the end of that corridor was what seemed to be a doorway; at all events, there was a recess where a door might have stood. It was papered over with a faded paper that must have been on the walls for many years; but under that paper, as Gideon ran his finger over it and tapped it, there certainly seemed to be the outlines of the panels of a door. And yet that wall was the party wall which divided this house from the next. Gideon stood for a long time with his beard in his hand, and his head on one side, looking at that door, and wondering; he couldn't make it out at all. He would probably have remained there for a much longer time had not he heard the man Lope toiling up the stairs and calling to him. Not wishing to be found there, he hastened down, and met the man half-way.

"Well, what's the matter with you?" he asked.

"Someone to see you," answered Lope.

"I can't see anyone—I don't want to see

anyone," retorted Gideon Boatwright. "Who is it?"

"Wouldn't give his name; seems poor and shabby," answered Lope, knowing from long experience what information his master would most require concerning any chance visitor.

"That's enough; you know I won't see him," said Gideon shortly.

Lope was turning away, and had already got down a couple of stairs painfully, when he looked back over his shoulder to add other information. "Says he comes from next door," he muttered.

"Idiot!" exclaimed Gideon Boatwright savagely. "Why didn't you say so before? You didn't mention my name?"

"Of course not," retorted the other sulkily.

"Well, I'll see him. Who is it—the husband?"

"No—I've never seen the man before," said Lope; and led the way downstairs.

In one of the cheerless rooms stood a tall young man, with very lank hair falling on to the collar of a shabby coat, and presenting to Mr. Gideon Boatwright a placid, smiling face that seemed to be rather destitute of chin. Under one arm he held a wide-brimmed felt hat, and in one hand he had some sheets of paper, loosely fastened at one corner. As

Gideon Boatwright entered he bowed elaborately, and inquired with deep earnestness—

"The master of the house?"

"This is certainly my house," said Gideon curtly. "What's your business?"

The visitor bowed again, and proceeded glibly. "My business, sir, is twofold. In the first place, let me introduce myself. I am Leopold Potter, and I am that most despised thing among men—a poet. I may say at once——"

"You need say no more, sir," broke in Gideon, raising a protesting hand. "I have no room nor place in my life for poetry."

"There you are wrong, sir, believe me; there you are very wrong indeed. I bring with me a recommendation, in that I am well acquainted with your neighbours in this most charming retreat; and I venture to offer you, with all due respect, a small Ode of Welcome, to compose which I have sat up the greater part of a particularly cold and cheerless night."

Mr. Gideon Boatwright was about to retort, "More fool you!" when he remembered that this man might be useful to him. Therefore he waited.

"I ask for nothing—I make no demands," went on Leopold Potter eagerly. "I only suggest that as I live—or attempt to live—by

Hullo!

my poetry, I should welcome any small amount that might be laid, as it were, upon the altar of the Muses. I ask for no actual remuneration; it is only with a sincere pleasure that I now lay before you my efforts."

Holding his papers firmly before him, Mr. Potter began in a high nasal voice to recite that which he had written—

"Oh! Ancient One—who to our friendly Grove has strayed—
Be mine the pleasing task——"

"Here—that'll do—that'll do!" broke in Gideon. "We'll take the poetry as read; I don't believe in that sort of stuff myself. In the first place, my friend, I'm not so particularly ancient, and in the second place I'm not quite sure that it *is* a friendly Grove. I've always heard that poets take too much on trust. Now you tell me that you live by that stuff,"—he pointed scornfully to the sheets which the dejected Leopold Potter was holding,—"and I suppose you expect a price for it—eh?"

Leopold beamed, and smoothed out the papers. "Well, of course, sir, if you should feel that any humble efforts of mine were worthy of recognition—there are seven sheets closely written, and I defy you to find a flaw in them—and most flattering some of

them—the lines, I mean—of course I should be very willing to sink my pride——"

"Exactly," broke in Gideon. "Most people in this world are willing enough to sink their pride when it comes to a matter of food and clothing. Now, then, listen to me. You say you come from the adjoining house?"

"In a sense—yes; in another sense—no," said Potter, his hopes dashed again in a moment. "As you will doubtless have learned, genuine poetry does not receive that recognition which is clearly its due. In other words, it doesn't pay. Consequently, I have found myself over and over again, strange as it may seem, actually in want of a meal, and even with no place in which to sleep. On such occasions my good friend Chadwick Merrigan —your neighbour, you know—has been good enough to invite me to his board, and even to provide me with a bed."

"Yet I seem to have heard that Mr. Chadwick Merrigan has precious little board even for himself and his family," said Gideon slowly.

"Sir, you are very right," said Mr. Potter eagerly. "In giving to me I think he feels that he is giving to Literature and to the Muses generally; at least, *I* like to think so."

"So that you are a pensioner on his bounty?"

said Gideon. "Now, don't let's blink facts, or call things by their wrong names. Let's come to this poetry of yours; what's its price?"

Leopold Potter blushed, and shifted his feet uneasily. "What it might be worth if I had the recognition that is my due," he muttered, "I cannot say." Then, looking up, he said, "Times are hard, and I am but a poor scribe. I'll leave it to you."

"Seven sheets of stuff that I don't want—so many hundred lines of rubbish that begin by insulting me," said Gideon mercilessly. "Hand it over; I'll give you a sovereign for it."

Leopold Potter had expected an offer of half a crown; he almost fainted as he heard Gideon's words. "Sir, you are most generous; would that the world contained a few more such men!" he said. "Under the circumstances, you must really permit me to take them away with me and polish some of the lines."

"Thanks—we'll leave out the polishing,' said Gideon, producing a sovereign from his pocket. "Here—catch!" He tossed the coin across, and Leopold with sparkling eyes caught it, looked at it rapturously, and transferred it to his pocket.

"Sir, this is a day of days!" exclaimed

Potter. "Now do I feel that my star is in the ascendant—now do I know——"

Gideon interrupted him quickly. "Yes, yes—never mind about your star; come down to earth a bit. Give me those papers. So" —he thrust the sheets into his pocket—"our bargain is complete. But, Mr. Leopold Potter, seeing that I care nothing for poetry, and seeing also that I am a hard man of business that doesn't care to part with sovereigns except for some very good reason, why do you suppose I've bought this stuff?"—he tapped his pocket as he spoke,—"and why do you think I've paid you so handsomely for it?"

Once more Leopold Potter's hopes were dashed to the ground; his vanity was shaken to the depths. "I—I certainly thought—I certainly hoped——" he spluttered.

"That I admired the stuff, and was willing to pay for it generously," sneered Gideon Boatwright. "Nothing of the sort; I bought it, and I paid for it, because there's a condition I want to impose upon you—something I want you to do for me in return. You'll notice that I pay beforehand—and to the tune of twenty shillings."

"Anything—anything in the world that I can do for you!" exclaimed Potter eagerly. "I would write another ode—a descriptive poem concerning any event——"

"Thank you; I've told you I don't deal in poetry," said Gideon. "If I hadn't thought that you could be useful to me I should never have taken the trouble to see you at all. You tell me that you know these people next door—that you are intimate with them?"

"I have known them a very long time," replied the other, staring at the old man wonderingly.

"Then you are the man I want," said Gideon. "I suppose in your wild poetic dreams you have imagined once or twice that particular sort of fairy relative that comes in, in the nick of time, to help deserving people and to lift their troubles away from them—haven't you?"

"Yes, I have," said Potter, staring more than ever.

"Now, should you say, for instance, that I look that character?" asked Gideon. "Come, now—as a man, not as a poet. Be frank."

Leopold thought of the coin in his pocket and hesitated. But he had brains enough to see that this new patron would expect the truth, and would in all probability like to have it. Therefore he said what was in his mind. "Frankly, sir," he said, "I don't think you look the character at all."

Gideon Boatwright laughed—quite jovially for him. "That's honest, at all events," he

remarked. "Only it happens that you are wrong. I have a deep and keen interest in these people who have befriended you, and I want to help them. Oh, you needn't look so doubtful," he added sharply, as he surprised a look of incredulity on Leopold Potter's face; "I mean what I say."

"Well, they need help," said the other. And then, with that imaginative quality which had gone so far to undo him rising uppermost, he exclaimed, "And is it given to me to tell them that there has risen one who will help them—one who will lift their burden from them—clasp them in his arms—lift them out of obscurity——"

"Stop, you madman!" exclaimed Gideon Boatwright angrily. "If you're going to play that game you'd better give me back my money and go about your business. Don't you understand that I don't want them to know anything about it?—that if I play the generous friend I want to play it in the dark, without their knowing who that generous friend is?"

"I beg your pardon; I am truly sorry," said Leopold, with another of those curious bows which seemed to double him almost in half. "You would do good deeds by stealth, and blush to find them fame—eh?"

"That's about the mark," said Gideon. "I

see that we understand each other. Now, what I want you to do is this: to play the spy upon them, and to let me—their friend, you understand—to let me know all that they are doing and all that is happening to them. I'm sure you'll see at once that I couldn't go to them direct; it wouldn't do at all; their pride would be up in arms at once. But you shall help me to befriend them in secret."

"This is the sort of thing for which I have been waiting all my life," said Potter, clasping his hands and smiling. "I shall really enjoy this. I shall look upon their misery and their misfortunes, and shall know all the time that at a given moment those miseries and misfortunes will be lifted from them, and that I—I, their poor pensioner—shall have been instrumental in helping them. Sir, I thank you."

Gideon Boatwright grinned, with a grin that was not altogether pleasing. Truth to tell, he despised this poor creature heartily enough, seeing in him only something he could put to his own uses, and discard when the right time came. Here, in a moment as it seemed, he had found what he sought: something to fetch and carry for him, and do his bidding, and spy upon those concerning whom he was so anxious to learn everything. Well, the man had been paid, and would be paid again, if necessary;

beyond the fact that the creature was useful, he did not count in the scheme of things at all.

In a very little time Mr. Leopold Potter bowed himself out, with something of an air of mystery; for was he not going upon a secret mission? Already he had given his patron such news as he could; already he had explained everything that he knew concerning those who had so often befriended him in his hour of need. He carried in his foolish brain all sorts of mad ideas concerning what was to happen to those in Poverty Castle; found it difficult, indeed, to hold his tongue, and was fearful lest his own buoyant looks should betray him. Indeed, he was careful to put on an air so depressed when he met them, that they anxiously asked him if by chance he happened to be ill, or to be in worse circumstances even than usual.

And meanwhile Gideon Boatwright felt that his sovereign had been well expended, and that he was creeping nearer and nearer into the lives of those with whom for the moment he was so deeply concerned.

But while Leopold Potter was laying his Ode at the feet of that grim tenant of the adjoining house, events in Poverty Castle had been moving fast. The days of respite were gone, and those to whom the situation appeared hopeless were closing in upon the doomed family, with the full intention to get what was

to be got out of them at the earliest possible moment. At the first breath of disaster Chadwick Merrigan shut himself in his study, and strove to work harder than ever, with the vague idea that in some such fashion he could hold off the fatal day; Mrs. Merrigan, as she had ever done, went with him, and left the storm to burst outside. The valiant Wicks put herself, theoretically, before the door of that locked room and defied all comers. For the valiant Wicks (whose wages had not been paid) had thrown in her lot as it were with the besieged, and had burnt her boats.

"All I can tell yer is that you've got to live on 'ope fer a bit; it's about all we've bin livin' on fer a long time past," she assured the anxious ones.

Perhaps the most pathetic part of the whole business lay in the fact that everyone conspired to keep the desperate nature of the case from those chiefly concerned—Chadwick Merrigan and his wife. Wicks resolutely refused to allow them to be seen; the Pirate and the Scrap and the others ranged themselves, metaphorically speaking, before the locked door of the study as a species of bodyguard. And it was that action which led indirectly to a temporary solution of the difficulty.

It happened that a certain formidable butcher and a plaintive grocer had called at the same

time—the butcher with threats, and the grocer with entreaties. Wicks had parleyed with them as best she might, but they had stood their ground, and had demanded to see those in authority. They had dealt hitherto with the redoubtable Wicks; they felt now that they must go past her, and discover what hope, if any, was to be found elsewhere. Consequently here they were, in the very house itself, with square-topped tradesman-like hats on, and with loud voices demanding to see the master.

And there came upon the scene the Pirate and the Scrap. The Pirate, desperately wishing that all those shadowy creatures of his imagination might suddenly appear, to do his bidding, and to inflict upon these people the punishments they deserved; the Scrap, with her active brain at work, to discover by subtlety a way out of the difficulty. The butcher and the grocer, inclined at first to have nothing to do with beings so unimportant, yet consented at last to state their grievances, and to state them with a clearness which should appeal even to minds so young as these.

It was money they wanted—and always money. The very ethics of trading were reduced to the simple terms of goods having been supplied and not having been paid for. And the Scrap looked at the Pirate, and the Pirate at the Scrap.

"You see," said the Scrap, "it's a little difficult to explain to you — because you wouldn't understand. But you'll get your money—just as soon as the Old Man—that's Father, you know—has time enough to give it to you." She smiled reassuringly; and even the Pirate consented to smile, although deadly hatred was in his heart.

"It's we who've waited time enough," said the butcher aggressively. "I don't see why we can't see the gentleman ourselves."

"That's where you're so foolish," said the Scrap pityingly. "You don't seem to understand that when a gentleman has work to do that means hundreds and thousands of pounds——"

"I should say even more than that," broke in the Pirate.

"Or even more than that," the Scrap corrected herself, "it's scarcely likely that he'll see people about bothering bills. Why, he doesn't even see his family."

The butcher glanced at the grocer, and the grocer glanced back again. The Pirate was impressed by the fact that tears stood in the eyes of the Scrap; he wondered how she managed it.

"But why not, if I may make so bold?" asked the grocer feebly.

The Scrap broke into bitter wailing; at least

it seemed so, as she covered her face with her hands, and her shoulders shook. "No—he doesn't even see his—fam—fam—family!" she sobbed. "Do you think it likely that he would see a bu—bu—butcher, or a gro—gro—grocer?"

Once again the grocer glanced towards the butcher, and the butcher, with raised eyebrows, glanced back again. "Do you mean to say, my little dear, that he shuts 'isself away from the world?" asked the grocer with awe.

"He would kill anyone that went near him," said the Pirate, tumbling to the situation, and with his mind as usual running on blood.

"He wo—wo—won't see his fam—fam—family!" wailed the Scrap, as a species of chorus behind her hands.

The butcher and the grocer rose together. "Of course we didn't know," said the grocer. "We only wanted to be sure that it was all right, and that a little something on account——"

"When's the earliest you think he'll be able to see 'is family—and others?" asked the butcher.

"Almost any day now," said the Pirate. "You see, it's frightfully upsetting for us; but we have to put up with it, when the Old Man—Father, I mean—is making such lots of money."

"I wish he wouldn't make so much!" sobbed the Scrap. "I wish he'd see more of his fam—fam—family!"

"You'll mention the little matter to 'im, I 'ope?" said the butcher, as he prepared to take his leave.

"Just as soon as we dare," said the Pirate.

The two men went away doubtfully enough, but feeling that perhaps there might be something in it after all. And the Scrap lowered her hands from her face, and waiting until they were clear of the house, burst into a peal of laughter that shocked even the Pirate.

"Saved!" she exclaimed. And then, seeing the puzzled look on the face of the Pirate, she whispered a little shamefacedly, "I didn't really tell crackers—did I? Because it *might* happen any day—and after all the Old Man doesn't see the family when he's busy?—does he?"

"Except when the family shoves itself in," said the Pirate.

"I know I was horrid, Pirate," said the Scrap, "but we must stand by the Old Man."

"We will," exclaimed the Pirate in a tone of determination. "And what we've got to think about, now that we've scuttled 'em and made 'em haul down their flags, is how to get something out of 'em for Christmas. They

have choice cargoes aboard," went on the Pirate unctuously; "we will sack, burn, and slay——"

"And after all, Pirate," broke in the Scrap, following her own line of thought, "one of these days the Old Man will be all right, and will pay up—as the butcher says—won't he?"

"We'll hope so," said the Pirate drearily. And then in loyalty added, "We know he will."

CHAPTER V

THE MAGIC DOOR

It is extremely doubtful whether that desperate ruse adopted by the Pirate and the Scrap for the furthering of their designs would have succeeded, had it not been for the accidental interference of Mr. Burls. In a sense the butcher had been satisfied, and the grocer had lost some of his doubts; and they had communicated their feelings to others to whom Poverty Castle looked for supplies. But at any moment that mood might change, and the long threatened invasion take place. At the moment the storm had not burst.

It wanted but a week to Christmas when it happened that Wicks heard, by the merest accident, of the generous conduct of Mr. Burls on that particular Sunday when, under convoy of the Pirate and the Scrap, he had been brought into the house, and had promised to say nothing about a little matter of a cheque. Wicks had had for a very long time a soft

corner in her heart for Mr. Burls, even though usually speaking she passed him by with a toss of the head, taking no notice of his bashful salutation—which generally consisted in the raising of two fingers to the brim of his hat. Nay more, it may be said that more than one excursion on the part of Mr. Burls into Quaker's Gardens of an evening, while it had for its excuse the idea of looking at his property, had for its object the idea of looking at Wicks. For Wicks was of a trim figure, and carried herself well; and Mr. Burls, who was of the easiest nature, was particularly struck by the alertness of Wicks, and by her somewhat masterful manner.

Wicks, therefore, though her pride was of the greatest, felt that in this case she might conscientiously offer her own personal thanks to Mr. Burls without any lowering of her dignity; in her heart of hearts she rather welcomed that opportunity. Behold her, therefore, in the most abrupt fashion opening the shop door leading to Mr. Burls' establishment, and facing that astonished man, who loomed huge before her in his shirt sleeves. Mr. Burls raised the two fingers to a hat that wasn't there, and stammered a "good-mornin'."

"Good-morning, Mr. Burls," snapped Wicks, not looking at him, but gazing with great

:arelessness all round the shop, as though 'ather depreciating its value. "I'm not given .o goin' out of my way to any extent for the)leasin' of anybody; only it's come over me .hat I might say a word to a certain party :hat's be'aved in a fashion I might almost call andsome." Thus Wicks breathlessly and at a great rate, and still without looking at Mr. Burls.

Mr. Burls stooped laboriously and picked up a shaving, and put it between his bearded lips. "If," he said slowly, "there should be any reference in what you're sayin', Miss, to a party I might be knowin' by name, though not to mention it, I thank you kindly. P'r'aps I might almost say that wotever that party 'ave done 'ave been done on account of reasons 'e may some day find it in 'is 'eart to explain. I said, Miss," added Mr. Burls with emphasis,—"I said, Miss,—in 'is 'eart."

Wicks glanced at him for a moment, coloured a little, and tossed her head. "I can't say I exactly catch your meanin'," she said, "but perhaps the time 'll come when you might care to make yourself more clear. Same time, I've said my thanks, an' I'll be movin' on. Good-mornin' to you, Mr. Burls." Yet strangely enough, although she spoke with an air of finality, Wicks did not move.

Mr. Burls thoughtfully chewed his shaving,

and looked out of the corner of an eye at Wicks. Wicks was decidedly good-looking, he thought; he had never had time to examine her leisurely before. He thought of that small room at the back of the shop, where he daily took his meals, waited upon by an elderly woman who came in to "do for him" by the day; and he wondered, with a sort of hot feeling inside at the thought, what Wicks would look like in the large arm-chair there, with her hat off. He opened his mouth twice to speak, but shut it again on words he dared not utter.

"Well, I must be goin'," said Wicks, making a feint of moving towards the door.

"One moment, Miss,"—Mr. Burls edged a little nearer to Wicks, who raised her eyebrows in faint surprise as she glanced up at him. "Would you care to see"—Mr. Burls almost choked in his emotion—"would you mind lookin' at the premises?"

"Well, I 'aven't much time, but I dessay I can snatch a couple of minutes," said Miss Wicks. "Though what you should want me to see 'em for quite gits over me."

"This," said Mr. Burls, throwing open the inner door,—"this is wot I call the parlour."

"It's small—an' wants a jolly good turn-out," said Wicks, sniffing. "Who looks after you, for goodness' sake?"

"There's a woman comes in an' tidies up a bit, an' cooks," replied Mr. Burls, sighing. "I don't complain."

"Then you ought to," snapped Miss Wicks. "An' you live 'ere all alone?"

"All alone," said Burls, gazing at her abstractedly.

"Fancy!" Wicks absent-mindedly sat down in that very chair in which Mr. Burls had fancied her, and shook her skirts neatly over her feet. "Yet it ain't so bad, when you come to look at it," she went on. "I should say it could be almost cosy, with the gas lit and the door shut for the night."

Mr. Burls gazed at her wistfully. "I assure you, Miss, it could be quite cosy," he said.

"But I can't say I should like it alone," said Wicks, getting to her feet. "But I dessay one of these days you'll be turnin' your fancy to somebody as you'd like to see sittin' 'ere with you. You men are all alike. You never know when you're well off."

"I ain't so sure," said Mr. Burls. "An' it's a funny thing you should 'ave spoke of that just now; the idea's bin runnin' in my 'ead this over so long past."

"Fancy that, now!" Miss Wicks was properly astonished; she even laughed at so curious a coincidence. "Got anybody in your eye, so to speak?"

"I 'ave got somebody in my eye—an' I've 'ad that somebody in my eye for a very long time," said Mr. Burls. "And one of these days I shall say something to that somebody—all of a sudden; in other words, I shall out with it."

"Bit of a shock for 'er," said Wicks, with a quick laugh. "'Owever, I wish yer luck."

"Thank you, Miss." Mr. Burls, feeling that he was gaining ground, beamed upon her; Miss Wicks coloured again, and hurriedly held out her hand.

Mr. Burls took the hand, and in an absent-minded fashion began gently to stroke it with the other hand; Miss Wicks looked down at the process, but said nothing.

"An' w'en I comes face to face with that party, Miss," went on Mr. Burls, keeping time with his slow voice to the slow movement of his hand, "I shall say to that party—I shall say——"

"What, Mr. Burls?" Miss Wicks spoke softly, and kept her eyes lowered.

"I—I 'aven't quite made up my mind—but wotever it is I shall say it," said Mr. Burls.

Wicks snatched her hand away, and went to the door. Turning there, she spoke in her old sharp voice—indeed, with some new asperity in it.

"I declare that I've quite forgot what I

come to say—and it seems to me I've bin what you might call wastin' my time," she observed icily. "But what I wanted to say is this: that it seems to me you might put in a word for me an' for them in Quaker's Gardens."

"I'll do anythin' that's in my power," said Mr. Burls—"'specially for you."

"You've done a good lot already," said Miss Wicks, unbending a little. "But if you could put a word in with anybody you know—such as butchers and bakers and such like, you'd be doin' me—*me*, Mr. Burls, a great favour."

"W'ich is to say——" Mr. Burls looked at her in perplexity.

"How slow you are!" she ejaculated. "If anybody should ask you 'ow things are goin', or if they're likely to get paid—if you could let 'em know that *you're* quite satisfied——"

"But I can't say I am quite satisfied," broke in Burls, looking at her with meaning. "S'pose, when it comes to the time that I ask that party wot's bin referred to wot 'er feelings are—s'pose that party don't see it in the same light—what then?"

Miss Wicks glanced at the door, to make sure that her way of escape was clear; glanced at Mr. Burls, and laughed coquettishly. "I think you can safely leave that to the party,'

she said; and was gone round the door in a flash, and out into the street.

Mr. Burls, in an awkward attempt to detain her, knocked his nose against the edge of the door, but did not seem greatly to mind. He gave vent to various deep chuckles as he rubbed his nose and went back to his work.

But from that time Poverty Castle took heart of grace, by reason of the fact that Mr. Burls, in a mysterious fashion, went about whispering. Mr. Burls being something of a man of substance, and owning property, was listened to; so that when in impressive whispers he casually mentioned to various tradespeople that so far as Mr. Chadwick Merrigan was concerned he—Mr. Burls—was quite satisfied, accompanying the information with an enigmatic smile, the tradespeople felt that he probably had inside information, and was to be trusted. Whereas, as we know, Mr. Burls was thinking of his affections, and not of his pocket.

Wicks also, with heart flutterings, understood that she had an ally, and that for a time at least, although no money came in, none need go out. Life was opening out for Wicks; although she had no immediate intention of deserting Poverty Castle or its inmates, she yet looked abroad, and already decided in her

own mind what was to be done in regard to that little sitting-room in which, for a brief moment, she had seated herself and had smiled upon Mr. Burls. Mr. Burls, for his part, began to haunt Quaker's Gardens, especially in the evening, in the hope of seeing Wicks; until the Pirate's heart died within him at the thought that, after all, Mr. Burls might have changed his mind, and might be coming after that cheque.

Mr. Leopold Potter, meanwhile, had flourished exceedingly upon the one gold coin he had seen in the course of years. Hitherto whatever money the gods had sent him had come in silver, or even in copper; now suddenly he faced wealth. To say that he haunted that house which adjoined Poverty Castle would be to state the fact but baldly; as a matter of fact, he hung about its portals, and even accompanied Lope on his errands, obsequiously striving to gain even that man's regard. He wrote other odes, and thrust them into the letter-box; remembering the commission which had been given him, and hoping to ingratiate himself with his patron, he called on any and every excuse with news concerning those at Poverty Castle. Yet the news for which Gideon Boatwright waited did not come; ruin was not near to Chadwick Merrigan and those that belonged to him yet.

The old man chafed at the thought that he was living here in discomfort, waiting and watching, and hoping for what did not happen. In that far land across the seas he had dealt broadly and strongly with broad and strong matters; had dealt in hundreds and thousands, where these people dealt in pence and shillings. He came to see that a man might live for a long time, by one shift and another, without touching disaster; and he wanted these people to touch disaster, and that quickly. When Leopold Potter brought him the news that all was still well with them, and that preparations were being made for the great feast that was to come within a week, he was minded to curse Leopold Potter and everyone else, by reason of the fact that in some fashion he was being cheated of what was his. And then it came upon him that he might make this witless creature an instrument ready to his hand—might play upon him as he could not have played upon a stronger man.

"So they're getting ready for Christmas—are they?" he asked, with a sour smile. "Spending money, I'll be bound; thrusting aside their troubles for the time being, and hoping for the best—eh?"

"Things seem certainly to be brighter with them," said Mr. Potter. "I know you're

interested, and therefore I know that you'll be glad that the sun shines for them, and that they are no longer really troubled. They seem to think that things are coming right. For after all, you know, what are debts to a man of genius?"

"What indeed?" said Gideon Boatwright ironically. "I suppose the State ought to support him—feed him and clothe him, and all that sort of thing. Do I understand you," he went on, "that these people, while they have no money, have yet got renewed credit, and are still keeping their heads above water?"

"Oh yes," exclaimed the poet gleefully. "There was a talk about an execution being put in—furniture taken, and all that kind of thing. That's what worried poor Merrigan; now he goes about laughing, and she goes about singing."

"Laughing and singing—eh?" said the old man sourly. "I'm glad to hear that; I'm very glad indeed. It's right that they should live in that fashion, paying no one—, and yet getting their fun out of life. But why shouldn't they do more? Why shouldn't they live even more extravagantly?" He asked the question on the mere whim of the moment, for a sudden thought had occurred to him.

"Sir," exclaimed the poet, "you're a man after my own heart; you understand so perfectly. There's a great deal too much talk of money and debts in this sordid world; it's all money—money—money; all pay—pay—pay. Why shouldn't we be like children, and laugh in the sunlight, and make the most of life while we may?"

Gideon Boatwright watched him in contempt, and yet hid his contempt. For he was thinking deeply of how he might use this man; how he might, through him, suggest some course of action to those in Poverty Castle which should ultimately prove their ruin. The matter was not moving fast enough to suit him; this business of Christmas of which they thought so much would be upon them before they knew where they were, and they would enjoy it to the uttermost. And he had designed that they should spend it in the streets!

The thought that was in his mind gradually changed to words; he spoke confidentially to this man whom he had already bound to his service.

"I told you the other day that I wanted to do these people a service," he said. "For that reason I asked you to bring me what information you could concerning them—to keep me posted as to all that happened to them."

"And have I not done it?" demanded Leopold Potter, spreading out his weak hands. "Have I not told you everything?"

"Yes," said the old man slowly, as he pulled at his beard. "And how much have you told them?"

"Told them?" Potter stared at him, not understanding.

"Yes—yes," exclaimed Gideon impatiently. "How much have you told them about their neighbour who is interested in them, and wants to help them—eh?"

"Not a single word, as I live," replied the other earnestly. "They know nothing of you."

"I'm glad of that," said Gideon, after a pause during which he had regarded the poet suspiciously. "I thought you might have forgotten what I might be able to do for you, and have told them about me. I didn't want that—because I don't like thanks. For the present at least I want to remain unknown."

"I have already seen something of your generosity, sir," said Leopold Potter feelingly. "But I should like to know why you take this deep interest in them, and who you are. You see, sir, in this unromantic world one likes sometimes to come across those who are unlike

their fellows; I see in you a subject for a great poem."

"Then don't write it," said Gideon. "But if you want to know, I am related to them; I've taken a fancy to them; and I mean to help them. But I want to do it, as you term it, in a romantic way—with your help, of course," he added, with veiled contempt. "The only thing that occurs to me is that we're not getting on fast enough; we're not spending money—we're not living in the sunshine—which I believe is your phrase for it."

"Sir, I would remind you that we—by which, I suppose, you mean the family next door—have no money to spend."

"What does that matter, when there is a rich man behind them, ready to help them when the time comes?" demanded Gideon Boatwright, seeing his way more clearly with every moment. "What does that matter, when they have credit, and when they can use that credit to any extent they like? Of course you mustn't tell 'em that there's a rich relative next door—a rich relative who has come from foreign parts, with heaps of money and all that kind of thing; but can't you make 'em extravagant?"

"Extravagant?" Leopold Potter repeated the word in a dazed fashion, and looked at

his patron. "But you see, sir, fortune does not smile on them, and they are in low water."

"But fortune will smile on them—some day—and they will be in low water no longer," said Gideon impressively, striking the poet lightly with the back of his hand on the breast. "One of these days—at the proper moment, you understand—I shall step in, and shall pay their debts, and shall put them right with the world. I believe that's the sort of thing that's always done, in your stories and your poems and what not—isn't it?" he asked, with a grin.

"Of course—I hadn't thought of that," exclaimed the other, grinning in turn. "How perfectly delightful!"

"Yes—isn't it?" snarled Gideon. "To let them be as extravagant as they like; to let them plunge into debt in all directions; to pay no one, and laugh at the thought of bankruptcy. And then at the end this kindly relative, who has toiled hard for his money, and has made it by the sweat of his brow—let him come in, and settle things for them, and smooth their path, and cry, 'Bless you, my children; be happy!'"

"Is that what you mean to do?" asked the guileless poet, with a note of suspicion in his voice.

"Why not?" snapped the other. "Don't I tell you that it's what is always done in your stories and your poems? One must follow the old rule, you know; who am I, that I should strike out a new line? So teach them to be extravagant; lure them on to spend money; I'm the man who pays in the end."

"You have a noble heart, sir," said Leopold Potter.

"So I've been told," said the old man. "It's expensive to have a noble heart—but I shan't mind that when the time comes for paying. Above all things, however, let it be understood that you don't tell them the truth. That's our secret, between you and myself. I am a stranger, so far as they are concerned. Forget that—and I forget you."

The poet swore by all his gods that he would never forget that injunction; and indeed at that time he meant it. For this strange being he had so providentially met might prove a very gold mine; Leopold Potter saw himself writing easy verse for years to come, and drawing a substantial income from the pockets of this good-hearted, kindly old gentleman, who was so anxious to do good by stealth to his neighbours.

One question he asked, however, before he left the house, to set about in what fashion he

might discover that business of teaching the neighbours extravagance.

"You are a relative of Merrigan?" he asked. "In what way?"

"I'm no relative of Merrigan at all; I'm uncle to his wife," said Gideon grudgingly, in reply. "Her father was my brother—my only brother."

"Most touching—most touching indeed," said Leopold. "I see another poem in that; the long-lost returned from abroad—a pathetic meeting—a bursting heart beating against his——"

"Yes, yes—I know all about that—but I shall have to correct your facts a little before you start. Now you know what you have to do," he went on. "Let them know in what fashion you like that they may spend—that all is well with them; but not a word about me."

The poet went away, filled with romantic dreams, and seeing himself, if the truth be told, as a very important character indeed—the one character on whom everything was to hinge. In a fine vision he saw in the future the Merrigans rising up to call him blessed; saw his name honoured and treasured among them, by reason of this thing that he had brought about. For that was how he put the matter to himself.

But after he had gone the suspicious mind

of Gideon Boatwright began to see in what had been done a huge blunder. Why had he not kept the matter in his own hands? Why had he trusted this weak creature to help him? Yet, even with that thought, he comforted himself with the remembrance that the creature was weak enough not to be harmful; he dismissed him from his mind as someone paid to spy—someone who would do well what he was paid to do. But on his own account it occurred to him that he might find out something more concerning that household that was separated from him by a mere thin matter of bricks and mortar.

He remembered that strange door he had found, papered up, at the very top of the house; his mind reverted to it again and again. Was it possible that many years before there had actually been a communication between the two houses? It seemed likely; and the more he thought about it the more likely it seemed. He wondered if in that way he could penetrate into the other place, and see for himself what sort of lives they led, and who they were; and so gain some knowledge of them at first hand.

He determined to wait until, in the ordinary course, everyone in Quaker's Gardens would be asleep; then he would strip that door,

and see if by some lucky chance it could not be opened. The better to allay suspicion, even in the mind of Lope, he retired at the usual hour to his room; was waited upon by Lope as usual, to discover if anything more was wanted; and was finally left alone, partly undressed, with Lope gone for the night.

He allowed half an hour to elapse, and then came out on to the staircase, listening. The dreary old house was silent as the grave; Gideon Boatwright stole downstairs, pausing every now and then to listen. So he came to a room in the basement, where some great trunks were stored; and one of these he opened. Diving among the contents, with a flaring candle held above his head, he found an old-fashioned strong sailor's knife in a sheath—relic of his early pioneering days—and took it out, and slipped it into a pocket of the dressing-gown he wore. Then, as he rose to his feet, and softly closed the trunk, he heard above him in the house the sound of footsteps.

Lope had been disturbed, and was coming down. He had no desire to share his secrets with the man; whatever he meant to do in this strange business he meant to do in his own fashion, without disturbing anyone else, or allowing anyone else to know. He softly

blew out the candle, and sat on the trunk and waited.

The halting footsteps drew nearer; dragged themselves down the stone steps into the basement. Fortunately Lope carried no light, and he was evidently puzzled at finding all in darkness. Gideon could hear him groping his way about, opening doors, and muttering to himself; finally he heard him open the door of that room wherein he sat perfectly still on the trunk.

"Is anyone here?" demanded Lope in a whisper.

There was no sound, and he closed the door and went away again. Listening intently, Gideon heard him ascend the stairs and presently shut himself into his own room. Waiting a discreet interval, he made sure that the knife was in the pocket of his dressing-gown, and then ascended noiselessly to set about his task.

He went up in the darkness to the door of his room; went in to light the candle; came out again, and stood listening. He made a strange figure there in the silent house, with the candle flaring above his head while he peered into the shadows; with his long grey gown tied about him, and with his long grey beard falling upon his chest.

All still; he might surely venture now.

He went on up and up until he reached the attics, turned into that narrow corridor, and came to that recess which surely was a doorway. He set down his candle on the floor, and taking out the knife, commenced to cut away the paper.

His excitement grew as he worked; for as the paper was stripped away he saw clearly that there was a door, with an old-fashioned lock upon it, and with bolts let into the woodwork fastening it at the top and the bottom. He worked at the bolts for quite a long time before they would yield; indeed, he had to cut away the woodwork a little to make them move at all. He had accomplished that, and was turning to the more difficult task of the lock, when once again he heard below him in the silence someone moving in the house.

He stepped quickly to the end of the corridor, and looked down over the stair-head. Lope was toiling up, carrying with him this time a light. As he came within hailing distance, dragging his leg painfully and noisily behind him, his master called down to him—

"Go back!"

Lope stopped on the instant, and looked up; but instead of going back, he came steadily on. Once again Gideon Boatwright called to

him to go back; and once again, after a momentary pause, he came on, until at last he stood face to face with Gideon.

"What are you doing, master?" he demanded.

"What the devil's that to you?" snapped the other. "Learn to do as you're told; go back, you dog!"

"What are you doing, master?" asked Lope again, with the same persistency.

Gideon Boatwright looked at the man in some perplexity; then laughed shortly, and turned about; it was a surprising thing for him to do, but it seemed almost as though he must do it.

"Come and see," was all he said.

So they walked back along the corridor together—the one man stiff and straight, the other limping behind him. They came to where the candle stood on the floor, with the strips of paper that had been torn from the door. Gideon Boatwright pointed to the lock with the knife he held.

"I want to get that off; I want to get through there," he whispered. "It leads into the other house."

"And then?" Lope looked at him sharply.

"Then I should be able to discover what these people are like—see something of them

—spy upon them. The first thing is to get the door open."

He set to work again upon the lock, and in a short time had cut it away, and had broken the rusty screws that held it. But even then, as it was papered up and plastered up on the further side, it took the united strength of the pair of them to get it open, and to tear it out of place—with much rending and noise. And so at last Gideon Boatwright stood and looked through into Poverty Castle.

With Lope following, and both making as little noise as possible, they crept along a corridor which corresponded to that in the house they had left, and came to the stairs. Scarcely knowing what he meant to do, Gideon descended the first flight quietly, and after listening for a moment at a door, opened it and looked in. By the flaring light of the candle he held above his head he saw two small narrow white beds, each with a child in it, with tumbled hair upon the pillow. He closed the door softly, and came away.

"Girls," he whispered to Lope; and went on, and opened another door.

Two more beds here, but their occupants so snuggled down under the bedclothes that they could make nothing of them. Gideon crept in, holding his candle high; and, coming

to the first of the beds, saw a small round bullet head covered with black hair; the face was hidden by the bedclothes. He was stooping to examine it, when Lope, coming clumsily round the end of the bed to catch a glimpse also, stumbled against the foot of it. There was an instant stirring of the bedclothes, as the Pirate, with eyes still dazed with sleep, sat up to look about him.

Instantly Gideon Boatwright blew out the candle. With a hurried whisper to Lope, he began to grope his way out of the room, while the Pirate sleepily called out to know who was there. As the intruders got to the door, they heard him again call out sharply—

"Is that you, Old Man?"

They closed the door, and mounted the stairs as quickly as they could, and gained the corridor which now stretched from one house into the other. They strove to close the door, but the ragged paper and wood had got jammed in the edges of it, and it would not fasten. Above all, they heard in the house they had left stealthy noises and the pattering of feet. They closed the door as closely as they could, and went down into the house, Gideon cursing the other man roundly for his clumsiness, which had probably spoilt everything. And they had not gone very far on the way to their respective rooms when

hey heard those sounds of pattering feet and whispering voices penetrating into the house in which they were.

Now the Pirate, wakened from sleep, had been dimly conscious of someone stirring in the house. He could not recollect anything clearly; only it seemed to him that for a moment someone with a bright light had stood over him, and then had vanished. Dimly frightened, he got out of bed, and made for the snoring Fatima, and shook him violently into wakefulness.

"There's burglars!" he exclaimed, in a shaking whisper. "There's horrible burglars; one of 'em nearly slew me before he fled. Wake up, Fatima; but don't come unarmed!"

Fatima sleepily tumbled out of bed—a round, fat, comfortable figure in his pyjamas—and reached for a boot as the handiest weapon he could think of in that hazy moment. He pattered after the Pirate, who had stumbled out of the room in hot haste; fell against him, as the Pirate stopped to listen in the darkness.

Up above them could be heard the sound of cautiously moving feet upon the stairs. The Pirate's teeth were chattering, although he would not have confessed it; Fatima's knees were knocking together.

"They're making for the roof," said the

Pirate. "They always make for the roof. This means a chase among the chimneypots."

"Can't I go back and put something more on?" asked Fatima through his chattering teeth.

"Certainly not," exclaimed the Pirate indignantly. "We'll go and wake the girls—that is, if they're still alive. But we must be quick."

The Scrap tumbled out of bed at the first whisper of alarm, and brushed her straight hair out of her eyes; for this was an adventure. Her weapon was a hair-brush,—"If he hasn't got much on I shall hit him with the bristles; that'll hurt most," she assured them gleefully,—but the Angel came out, looking scared, and weaponless.

"Are you quite sure, Pirate?" she whispered.

"Dead certain," he exclaimed. "Just half a tick;" and he ran back to fetch the pride of his life—an air gun the spring of which was broken, and which had never been loaded since the first week he possessed it. But he felt safer with it somehow.

He headed the white-clad procession up the stairs, with the Scrap close beside him. The Angel carried the candle, and Fatima panted along in the rear. In that order they came to the corridor above, and there made that startling discovery that the solid wall was gone, and

in its place a door that stood ajar. And on the further side of that door a dim light showing.

They stopped for but a moment; then, with the Pirate leading in an approved Red Indian attitude of crouching watchfulness, and with his gun levelled, they stole up to the door, and cautiously crept through into the other house.

CHAPTER VI

MR. SMITH AND THE GNOME

You are to imagine those four figures advancing into that house of which they knew nothing, with their hearts beating a little thickly at the strange silence and desolation that was spread all about them. For as many years as they could remember they had known every inch of Poverty Castle, as children will, from cellar to garret; for as many years as they could remember they had scampered along that corridor in their play, and had come naturally to a dead stop at the wall, as they would come to a dead stop at any other wall. And here in a moment, at dead of night, the wall had opened, and on the other side lay—what?

Small wonder that they trembled as they went forward; small wonder that Fatima glanced back at the comfortable house they were leaving, with perhaps a thought that he might not see it again. For here was clear witchcraft; here, in the dead of night, a

marvellous thing had happened; and it might be almost that they were in dreamland, and not waking at all. Such things had been before, and such things would be again, as every boy and girl must know. On the morrow they might wake up, and hammer their small fists against the solid wall again, and find that they could not pass through.

But for the moment here they were, going stealthily down the corridor. The light they had seen came from below, and the Pirate thought of bands of robbers, and midnight torturings, and pirate's caves, and what not. Altogether it did not seem quite so desirable an occupation—this matter of piracy—under the present circumstances.

They knew, of course, of that mysterious old man who had walked backwards and forwards under the trees in Quaker's Gardens, and so had spoilt their playground for them; but they had seen so little of him that they scarcely connected him with the business now in hand. Nor did they, in their first wonderment, really realise where they were, or that this was the house that had for so long stood empty. They gathered in a little frightened group at the head of the stairs, peering over into the darkness below.

"Wouldn't it be better to kick up a noise, so as to frighten 'em?" whispered the Pirate.

The Scrap shook her head vigorously. "There might be dozens of 'em," she replied, grasping her hair-brush. "Let's steal on them unawares, and be ready. Hit the first one you see, and if he's bigger than you are run for it. But whatever we do, let's stick together."

They began stealthily to creep down the stairs towards the light, which seemed to come through the half-opened door of a room below. All would have gone well in that creeping process if, by the merest chance, the Pirate had not dropped his gun, and if, moreover, it had not descended with an amazing clatter down the whole length of the stairs. The luckless Fatima turned to run, but tripped up, and made more noise than ever; more than that, in the darkness he blocked the stairway, and the others fell over him. Even in the midst of their struggles they heard a quick step below, and the next moment someone stood at the foot of the stairs, looking up at the fighting mass of white-clad figures.

It was, of course, Gideon Boatwright, who, if the truth be told, had been waiting there, wondering what was going to happen. Both he and Lope had heard the stealthy movements above them in the house; and Gideon, in the midst of his annoyance at the failure of whatever plan had been in his mind, had yet

hoped that whoever was coming might slip back again, and so enable him to fasten that unlucky door securely. So he waited in that lower room, with Lope near at hand watching his master with anxious eyes. Then the clatter on the stairs showed Gideon that he could wait no longer, and he went out.

He recognised that the family had descended upon him; dimly by the light of his candle he could see the four of them straightening themselves, and eyeing him anxiously. Feebly enough, and yet with what sternness he could muster, he spoke—

"Hullo!"

"Hullo!" said the Pirate, standing on the stairs a little in advance of the others, and leaning against the wall.

"What are you doing in my house?" demanded Gideon.

"What were you doing in ours?" demanded the Scrap in reply.

There was no answer to that, and the little group stood huddled together, and watched as another figure came out of the room, and peered past the old man with the grey beard. This other figure was twisted and misshapen, and could not walk upright; they thought it had a fearsome appearance in the semi-darkness.

"How many are there of you?" asked

Fatima in a shaking whisper over the heads of the others.

"Two of us," said Gideon—"and we're not likely to hurt you."

"We'll take precious good care of that," retorted the Pirate, in hostile fashion.

"You can't sit on the stairs all night," growled Gideon, after another doubtful pause. "You can come down if you like, and discuss matters." He turned and went back into the room, carrying the candle with him, and giving the misshapen man a shove with his disengaged hand to send him before him. And then there was a brief and hurried consultation on the stairs.

"I vote we go back, and slam the door, and go to bed," said Fatima, with an uneasy glance above him.

"Perhaps we ought to call the Old Man," whispered the Angel.

"I'm for going on," said the Pirate sturdily. "That old chap might come in and cut our throats any night while we're asleep. I believe he was having a go for mine, when I woke up and frightened him."

"I shall go down, whoever else does," announced the Scrap briefly.

So it ended in their going down, and after a moment's hesitation venturing into the room. Gideon Boatwright was standing by the empty

fireplace, with his hands thrust into the pockets of his dressing-gown; Lope leaned against the wall near him, watching the children as they filed in. The place was bitterly cold, and the grate was rusty and empty; even the Pirate shivered a little, alike from fear and the temperature. Nor was the aspect of things any better when Gideon drew from the pocket of his dressing-gown that formidable knife in its sheath, and laid it on the mantelshelf.

"He *was* going to cut our throats!" exclaimed the Pirate in a hoarse whisper; and Gideon glanced from the knife to the boy, and back again, and laughed.

"No—I wasn't going to do that," he said quite seriously. "I only used that to open the door with."

"That was flat burglary, you know," said the Pirate.

"What did you come in for?" demanded the Scrap.

"Oh, I wanted to have a look at you," said the old man uneasily. "But come, you all of you look blue with the cold; on second thoughts, you'd better cut back to bed."

"Not till we know what you're going to do about it," urged the Pirate, standing with his feet planted well apart, and the gun resting in

his hands. "You've broken down our wall; you've come sneaking in at night——"

"I'll try and explain everything," said Gideon, with some meekness. "But first of all I think you all want covering up a bit. Lope, bring the rugs."

The misshapen man, under the fire of a battery of young eyes, shambled out of the room; and returned in a moment or two, laden with two enormous rugs. One of these he flung on to an old horsehair sofa at one side of the room; the other he dropped on the floor. Awkwardly enough, Gideon pointed to the sofa.

"Perhaps you—you young ladies could cover yourself with that," he said.

The Angel and the Scrap demurely seated themselves on the sofa, and drew the rug round them; it was big enough to hide them up to their chins. By the time they had done that Fatima and the Pirate were buried in the one on the floor, with their knees up to their chins. And then Gideon Boatwright addressed the two queer-looking bundles, with the heads peeping out of them. He began lamely, with glances at Lope from time to time, as though dumbly requesting him to bear out his statement.

"You see—I'd seen something of you—knew that you lived next door. I'd only recently

come to live here, and I wanted to know more about you. As a matter of fact I was interested in you—and in your father. Also," he added grudgingly,—"also I was interested in your mother."

"That sounds all right," said the Pirate, turning in his nest to glance at the Scrap, who nodded at him quickly.

"By the way, I hope you're all warm?" said Gideon, with a sudden new politeness upon him.

"I'm very comfy," said the Scrap. "But if you don't say something exciting I shall probably fall asleep. He really is the slowest old gentleman we've ever struck—isn't he, Pirate?" she added confidentially to that twin soul of hers.

"Give him time," said the Pirate gloomily.

Gideon Boatwright settled his chin under his beard in something of the old dogged fashion which meant that he was to rap out a sharp retort; but he thought better of it, and after an amazed silence went on.

"Not knowing you, of course I couldn't come up to the door—I mean the door in the street—and knock, and say, 'I should like to know something about you.' But it happened that I found that years and years before some one had made a door between the two houses so I"—he spread out his hands helplessly

and yet with a certain whimsicality—"so I broke in."

"Whatever else the man is, he's certainly honest," said Fatima, yawning.

"Who's your ugly friend?" demanded the irrepressible Scrap, staring round at Lope, who grinned at her affably.

"What the devil are you grinning at?" demanded Gideon; and Lope's expression changed in a moment. "I beg your pardon," he added hastily. "The man's not my friend; he's my servant."

This gave them a new interest in Lope; they stared at him round-eyed, while he edged uncomfortably against the wall. Gideon watched the four intent faces, and wondered what was coming next.

"I wouldn't wish to be rude for a moment," said the Scrap, "but I'd give—I'd give almost anything to know how he came to be all twisty like that."

There was an awkward silence; Gideon scowled down at the empty grate, and shot a glance at Lope, and then looked away again.

"Oh, he was hurt—hurt in an accident," he said. "Someone struck him harder than he meant to do—and broke a few bones."

"And what did *he* do?" demanded the Pirate, sniffing blood.

"He didn't do anything," said Gideon uncomfortably. "Suppose we talk about something else."

"This is quite interesting enough to go on with," said the Pirate. "Tell him, Scrap, what *I* should have done. Break it to him."

The Scrap closed her blue eyes, and recited: "With the leap of a panther he sprang in under the guard of his enemy. There was a guggling cry."

"Good!" murmured the Pirate, with a nod of his black head.

"And he sank to earth, to rise no more. His breath came in panty sobs." The Scrap opened her blue eyes and solemnly winked that which was nearest to the Pirate.

"Now you know," said the Pirate solemnly. "By the way, you haven't told us your name yet."

It would never do, of course, for Gideon Boatwright to declare who he was; that name carried into the other house must at once stamp him, and spoil any purpose he had. He glanced at Lope, and then said suddenly—

"My name's Smith—an ordinary name, but a good one."

"And what's his name?" asked Fatima, nodding towards Lope.

"I know—I know!" exclaimed the Scrap. "He hasn't got a name—not the twisty chap. He's a gnome; he's one of the Little People, that goes about doing good at night when everyone's asleep. What queer people you do meet, to be sure! Mr. Smith and the Gnome. Pirate,"—the Scrap hugged herself unctuously, and nudged the Angel,—"it is good for us to be here!"

Gideon Boatwright stared in astonishment at the children; then, with the nearest approach to a chuckle he could muster at such short notice, he administered a sly kick to Lope. "D'ye hear that?" he whispered. "You're a gnome." And for perhaps the first time in the joint history of the two men Lope gave him a friendly grin in response.

"Somehow or other, you don't look like a Smith," said the Pirate. "Where do you come from?"

"Thousands of miles away—over the sea," said Gideon. "And you understand," he went on artfully, "that having no boys or girls of my own I've taken an interest in those who live so close to me. I'm rather a lonely man; except for—for the gnome, I'm alone in the world."

"That seems rather a pity," said the Angel feelingly. "But I suppose as you come from abroad—thousands and thousands

of miles away — that you've got lots of money?"

After a moment's thought, Gideon Boatwright nodded slowly. "Yes," he said, "I've got plenty of money. But how should that interest you?"

"Because we never have enough," broke in the Pirate. "When I say we, I mean of course the Old Man."

"Who's the Old Man?" demanded Gideon sharply.

"Father, of course," replied the Pirate, in a tone which implied that anybody ought to know that. "If the Old Man gets any money, and Wicks can't get hold of him in time, it just flies. Wicks is the servant—least, she's more of a friend than a servant."

"And Wicks knows more about things than anybody else in the world," added the Scrap. "I shouldn't have been what I am if it hadn't been for Wicks. You take it from me there are no flies upon Wicks."

"Indeed?" said Gideon, raising his eyebrows in some perplexity. "But if the Old Man, as you call him, doesn't make money, how do you manage to live? I have to pay for what I get in this world."

"So do most ordinary people," retorted the Scrap, with fine contempt. "But then, you see, there are people who believe in Father's

head, and don't mind running risks. And some day the Old Man is going to make thousands and thousands."

"And then he says we'll paint the town red, and come home with the milk," said the Pirate gleefully. "Wake up, Fatima," he added, digging that sleepy youth in the ribs under the big rug—"For it's ho!—for the jolly, jolly life!"

"Aren't you making rather a noise, young man?" asked Gideon severely.

"I always do—till I'm restrained," murmured the Pirate complacently.

"What we're rather anxious to know, sir, is what you are going to do, now that that door is open, and you can get in at any time?" asked the Angel politely. "You see, it alters things a bit; it'll be so surprising for the Old Man, if he comes across you on the stairs—won't it?"

"He'd most likely go for you," said the Pirate; "and then there'd be a word-you-mustn't-say, sort of a shindy. And may I be there to see!" he chanted, beating time with his arms.

"I think I must leave you to explain what has happened," said Gideon. "More than that, I can promise you that I shan't come in again unless I'm invited. It wasn't altogether right of me, perhaps, to break open the door

like that; but then I didn't quite know what was on the other side."

"And to think that all these years we've had the chance of breaking it open, and having two houses to live in, instead of one—and never knew it!" sighed the Scrap dolefully. "I say," she added, looking about her sharply, "if you've got plenty of money I don't think much of your furniture. Why, you haven't got as nice things as we have."

"I've had to buy things in rather a hurry; I've not been long in England," replied Gideon.

"Did you come over just for Christmas? Don't you have Christmases where you came from?" asked Fatima, rubbing his eyes.

"Christmas is nothing to me; I certainly didn't come over for that," said Gideon. "Now I think you'd better get off to bed; if necessary, I'll see your father in the morning, and explain. I want to explain, because I should like, if possible, to be"—he shifted uneasily with his feet and looked at the floor—"to be friends with him—and with you."

"Oh, that's all right," the Pirate assured him. "We're friends with anybody that's nice. Of course, we don't know yet that you *are* nice, but we'll hope so."

"And it'll really do you a lot of good to

know us," said the Scrap. "My eye!—we can teach you a few things."

Lope suddenly interposed for the first time; he sidled up to Gideon, and plucked him by the sleeve. "Master—master," he whispered, "there's someone moving up above."

They all listened; the Scrap began to chuckle. This was an adventure indeed, at something past midnight in this strange house; and she knew in her own mind who it was that was coming in search of them. They had been missed from their beds, and the mystery of the open door had been penetrated.

"It's the Old Man," whispered the Pirate, kicking about under his rug. "Dive, boys and girls; there's going to be a shindy!"

Greatly to the discomfiture of Gideon Boatwright, the four heads instantly disappeared beneath the folds of the rugs; only the Pirate kept an eye exposed, the better to see every detail of the coming battle. And while Gideon Boatwright looked helplessly round, and viewed the two bundles, beneath which strange kickings and strugglings seemed to be going on, footsteps were heard descending.

What had happened needs, of course, no explanation. An anxious mother, wakeful by reason of anxieties not wholly lost at the end

of the day, had crept up to see that the little white beds were filled and the children asleep; and had come to the startling discovery that the little white beds were empty! In each case the sleeper had evidently tumbled out in a great hurry, because the bedclothes had been flung hastily upon the floor; but there was no blinking the fact that the two rooms were empty. For a moment the unfortunate woman gazed at them in sheer amazement—running from one to the other, in the vague hope that this might be some nightmare, from which she would awake, or that the children were playing some trick upon her, and hiding; then she raced downstairs to find Chadwick Merrigan.

There was no doubt about it; the children were gone. They looked at each other in dazed perplexity; began to whisper hurriedly various suggestions as to what could have become of them. They were used to the pranks of the Pirate and the Scrap; but it was rare indeed for those pranks to be carried beyond the time when tired little limbs stretched themselves for the night. Chadwick Merrigan searched high and low; he called upon the children coaxingly, hoping with each moment that they would spring out upon him, and disclose the trick; but in all the silent house was no sound of them. And at last the frightened pair mounted the stairs to the attics.

There, of course, while the mystery was solved, in a sense it became deeper still. They stood for a moment on their own side of that door that had so suddenly appeared in the solid wall; then hand in hand they went through into the other house; and two dressing-gowned figures stole down the stairs towards where a light showed and voices sounded. And thus joined the conclave in that lower room, where two moving bundles filled with suppressed laughter, and Gideon Boatwright and Lope awaited them.

It was an awkward meeting. Gideon knew instinctively what he had to face, and he was heavily handicapped by the presence of the bundles; Chadwick Merrigan and his wife, on the other hand, knew nothing, and were in deep perplexity. So that when they came into the room, and faced the old man with the grey beard and the slinking creature against the wall, they stood for a moment or two not knowing what to say. The fact of the open door and the finding themselves in this strange house at that hour bereft them of ordinary speech; it was as though hand in hand they were walking through the mazes of some nightmare, from which presently they would awake, to find themselves back in their own quarters, with the dream done with.

"I—I beg your pardon," stammered Merrigan. "I didn't know——"

"Of course you didn't," snapped Gideon Boatwright, annoyed with himself and his visitors and the circumstances and everything. "I suppose you're looking for your children?"

"Oh! if you please——" Mrs. Merrigan pressed forward eagerly.

Instantly the bundles flew open, and out came four heads. It was like a conjuring trick; as the Pirate afterwards said, it was good to see the Old Man's face. And there for a moment the picture was held: the children peering out of the great rugs, and Chadwick Merrigan and his wife staring at them in amazement. Gideon Boatwright, with his hands clasped behind him, surveyed the scene, wondering what was going to happen.

"I can't understand it at all," said Chadwick Merrigan, half laughing. "You see, we missed the children from their beds——"

"And then you came through the Magic Door—just as we did—and you found Mr. Smith and the Gnome," broke in the Scrap. "That's Mr. Smith over there; and the twisty person is the Gnome."

"We've been having a pow-wow," explained the Pirate. "We followed Mr. Smith into

his house—dogging his footsteps in the darkness—and—and here we are."

"My dears, I was terribly frightened," said Mrs. Merrigan; "and even now I don't understand in the least what has happened."

"There's a door, Mother dear, that never was a door at all," began the Angel,—"and Mr. Smith is a person to know. He is properly sorry for having broken open the door——"

"But he would know more of us," interrupted the Pirate, scrambling out of his rug. "Now we'll all go to bed, since the Old Man doesn't seem inclined for a shindy. Come on, Scrap."

"If you'll allow me," said Gideon Boatwright, with his eyes upon Mrs. Merrigan, "I'll explain everything at another time. I did find a door where there should never have been a door, and quite mistakenly I did break in. I can explain all that—at another time."

"It was certainly rather startling," said Chadwick Merrigan, as he stood with an arm about the Scrap. "Think for yourself what it meant to find them gone——"

"My dear sir, I can explain everything," broke in Gideon. "I tell you I didn't know; I found a door there, and tried to open it. It

shall be fastened up again, and you will forget the episode. Madam,"—he bowed awkwardly to Mary Merrigan,—"I am sorry to have caused any anxiety."

"It's all so strange," she replied, with the children clinging about her. "I don't understand."

"Good-night, Mr. Smith," the Pirate called back. "And don't you mind the Old Man; we'll smooth him down."

The Scrap walked sedately up to Gideon Boatwright. "It's been a very pleasant evening," she said demurely, holding out a slim hand to him, "and I hope we haven't frightened you."

"Not in the least, thank you," he replied, taking the little hand and holding it for a moment.

"Good-night, Gnome," she said to Lope; and surprisingly enough, he found himself touching that light hand, and looking into the blue eyes of the child. "I know that all gnomes are good, and help people at night."

And the Gnome, in the time to come, did not forget it.

So at last they passed beyond the Magic Door, and that door was thrust back into its place again. Chadwick Merrigan and his wife went back to their room, and talked

of the matter wonderingly for a long time; but for the present they could make nothing of it.

In the other house Gideon Boatwright went off to his room, and made preparations for sleep. Strangely enough, however, sleep would not come to him; he found himself sitting up in bed in the darkness, thinking and listening. So disturbed was he, in fact, that at last he got up, and lit a candle, and went off wandering aimlessly about the house. Perhaps for the sake of company, he came to Lope's room, and opened the door, and went in. Curiously, too, that strange creature lay awake, and blinked at him and his candle.

"What's the matter with you?" demanded Gideon roughly.

"I don't know, master," replied the man in a whisper. "Only I seem to hear their voices."

"Whose voices?"

"The children," answered the man. "I can hear the children's voices here in the dark; I can't sleep."

"You're a fool!" exclaimed Gideon, as he turned to the door. "Think about something else, and get to sleep. Children's voices indeed! Bah!"

Yet, as he went to his own room, and got

into bed in the dark, the children's voices seemed to be with him still; he sat for a long time, with the clothes huddled up about him, listening to them. And when presently he fell asleep, the voices were hauntingly with him in his dreams.

CHAPTER VII

OLD MAN DREAMS A DREAM

Now, by all the rules of civilisation, you may not break into the house even of a neighbour with impunity; whatever the act may look like at night, under curious circumstances, it must have a queer aspect when viewed in the cold light of day. Moreover, the question remains whether or not you are going to restore the broken part to something of what it was originally, or whether you intend to sweep aside all barriers, and make two houses into one. Those were precisely the questions which had to be asked on the morning which followed the first opening of the Magic Door.

Chadwick Merrigan, good easy fellow that he was, must of course be guided to a very large extent by those real rulers of his household—the children; and the children were clamorous for the door to be left open; there were vast possibilities of excitement in the

thought of ranging over another house, and making discoveries therein. But other considerations had to be weighed.

"My dear," Mary Merrigan said, "the situation is impossible. We can't have a man whom we only know as Mr. Smith walking into the place by night or by day; our privacy would be gone. From what the Pirate tells me, I think you ought to speak strongly to this Mr. Smith about his walking in at something after midnight; with any other children he might have frightened the lives out of them."

"But you see, my love, it didn't happen to be any other children," pleaded Chadwick Merrigan, in perplexity. "And he really seemed to be very sorry for what he had done, and most anxious to apologise. After all, a door is a door——"

"You are really too absurd, Old Man," exclaimed Mrs. Merrigan. "There was no door, so far as we were concerned; and you can see for yourself that it was deliberately broken down. As it stands now, the place is not our own. It's all very well to be neighbourly; but I think if you want to be friendly with this Mr. Smith, you must really ask him to fasten up that door again, and pay calls as other people do—from the street."

Chadwick Merrigan strode about his study,

pushing his fingers through his hair, as he usually did when in doubt or perplexity. "You see, Mary," he said at last, "the thing is so difficult. Curiosity—ordinary human curiosity—prompts this man to open a door that is obviously a door on his side of the party wall. He seems to have behaved very nicely to the children—and he tells us that he wants to explain."

"It'll take a lot of explaining," said Mrs. Merrigan. "The man has forced himself upon us; he may be a most disreputable character, for anything that we know to the contrary. I tell you I don't like it."

"And you would have me shut that door in his face, and tell him not to come near us again?"

"Unless he likes to call in the usual and proper manner — at the hall door," said Mary.

"You'll have all the children up in arms at once," said the Old Man. "It's a serious problem, and I'm hanged if I know what to do about it. I detest rows—and he looks like a man in the habit of having his own way. However, I'll think about it."

That being Chadwick Merrigan's usual method of settling a matter, and so leaving it, in a sense, on the lap of the gods, Mary shrugged her shoulders, and sighed, and left

it too. She was sorely perplexed, because that horrible door upstairs still remained open. Moreover, during the day the Scrap and the Pirate brought back from the other house wonderful accounts of what they had seen there; of treasures from far lands that had been dug out of the trunks, and heaped higgledy-piggledy in rooms destitute of furniture of the ordinary sort; of the strange fashion in which the Gnome prepared the meals and served them; of the semi-barbarous way in which the two men lived. All of which only led poor Mary Merrigan to feel that it was more than ever necessary that something should be done, and done quickly.

They always took their evening meal early, on account of the children; and generally Chadwick worked afterwards far into the night. On this particular day they were gathered round the fire for the last ten minutes before the children went to bed, when in the most astonishing fashion the door was opened, and "Mr. Smith" walked in. There was a shout from the children; but Chadwick sat very upright in his chair, and Mrs. Merrigan glanced at her husband with a flushed face.

"I'm sorry if I intrude," said Gideon, in his rough voice, "but I never stand on ceremony with anyone. I said that I would give some

explanation of what happened last night; I'm here to give it."

Chadwick Merrigan rose to his feet, and coughed, and laid down his pipe. "I have been speaking to—to Mrs. Merrigan about the matter, and I certainly feel"—the Old Man was faltering, and glancing appealingly towards Mary—"I certainly feel that some explanation is necessary. Of course, we wish to be neighbourly—and all that kind of thing——"

"At the same time, Mr. Smith," broke in Mary, with more decision, "we certainly feel that we should like our house to ourselves; and while we don't wish in any way to appear to resent——"

Gideon Boatwright held up his hand with a gesture of authority. "I quite understand," he said, "and I have only to take my leave. I see that you don't want any explanation; I see that you're upset by what has occurred. Very well; I won't force my company where I'm not wanted. Only I think afterwards you'll be a little sorry, perhaps, for what you're doing."

"I say, Old Man, he means well, and he's most interesting," the Pirate broke in.

"And the Gnome may do dreadful things unto us, if you offend his master," the Scrap suggested. "And, after all, he found the

door—Mr. Smith, I mean—and if you were a polite sort of person, Old Man, you'd ask him to sit down and make himself comfortable."

"Look here!" exclaimed Chadwick Merrigan, fairly goaded at last, "am I to be lectured by my own family?"

"Of course we're all dreadfully frightened," said the Scrap, grinning at him; and in a moment all the stiffness went out of the Old Man, and he laughed, and ran his fingers through his hair.

"I suppose you'd better sit down," he said. "As for the family, you've got to take it as you find it, and make the best of it—just as I do. There's been something wrong in its bringing up."

"It is a bit unique," said the Pirate, from his seat on the hearthrug.

Gideon Boatwright seated himself at a little distance from them, with his sharp eyes taking them all in. "When I said I had an explanation to offer, perhaps I was wrong," he said at last. "There's no explanation—except that I was filled with ordinary human curiosity."

"Didn't I say so?" demanded Chadwick of his wife.

"And there's no excuse, except that I'm a very lonely man, and that I heard children's

voices—and saw children at the windows—and thought I should like to know more of them. But of course the door can be fastened up again——"

The Pirate threw up his head and emitted a long sustained howl. The Scrap, after jerking herself rapidly near to him, and peering down his throat eagerly to see how he did it, lifted her small chin on her own account, and imitated him to perfection.

"Will you be quiet?" roared the Old Man, with his hands over his ears. "I don't know how I ever came to be cursed with such a brood as this," he added, laughing.

"For your sins, Old Man," chanted the Scrap, breaking off in her howl to tell him so.

"Or, on the other hand, of course the door can be left open, and I can give you a promise that I won't come through it again; although, if you like, the little people may visit me," went on Gideon Boatwright, as soon as he could make himself heard. "I am quite in your hands."

"Suppose we sit down quietly and talk it over," suggested the Old Man. "Do you smoke, Mr. Smith?"

"I do, sir," replied the old man laconically. And forthwith he produced an ancient briar pipe and some tobacco, and settled himself in his chair.

Now it happened in the strangest way that the Scrap, sitting blinking at the fire, drew herself back a little, until she rested against Gideon Boatwright's knees; and, after looking down at her for a moment or two, as though not knowing quite what to do, he dropped a hand on her thin shoulder, and kept it there. He did not talk; for in that peaceful atmosphere it seemed as though the explanations he had promised and the excuse he had to offer need not be given; he leaned back in his chair, and looked down at the child at his feet, and puffed at his pipe; through half-closed eyes he watched the fire.

On many nights in a far-off land he had sat, sometimes on the bare ground, and looked into a fire, and dreamed of the vengeance he would take some day because he was an outcast. On many nights in his lonely home, after he had amassed a fortune, he had sat looking into other fires, still nursing that vengeance that some day should fall upon the man who had wronged him, and upon those who belonged to that man. And it had come to this: that a little child leaned against his knee while he looked into the flames; and slowly the vengeance was dying within him.

Not in a moment, by any means. The roots of it had struck too deep for that. But Gideon knew that in striking at this faded

woman who sat looking into the fire, he must strike at the jolly, jovial Pirate, who wished him well and called him friend; Gideon Boatwright found himself smiling at the thought of how the Pirate had howled when there was a prospect that he might not see that friend again. Striking at that woman, he must strike this child, who leaned against his knee with the utter confidence of childhood. That was a matter for grave consideration—a something to be thought about in the long watches of the night, when his wrongs could come more clearly before him, and appear harder and colder than in the light of this fire.

Lest you should think the transformation too great, bear in mind the fact that the man had never sat at a friendly hearth before; and that, although he came to this one with a vile purpose in his mind, it was easy for that purpose to be changed. These people were so frank and friendly to a stranger who pleaded his loneliness; and, more than all else, Gideon Boatwright had never had anything to do with children. A man of good instincts, he had been bent and moulded to what he was through long years of brooding and loneliness; he had been a power among men by reason of his wealth, and that power and that wealth had made him hard. Here, for the first time in his

life, his wealth was nothing, and could not touch them; they accepted him for himself. In that lay their strength to move him, and all unconsciously to play upon the heart of the man whose heart had never been touched before.

He went back to his own lonely house, and to the ministrations of Lope, with the problem of the door still unsolved. In a sense the problem had been banished; Gideon Boatwright, in his disguise, had been accepted by the family in that extraordinary fashion, and his welcome for the future was assured. It was as a mere matter of pretence that the next day he had a workman in to clear away the torn strips of paper, and to mend the door, and to put a lock upon it. But even then, when the key was turned in the lock, it happened that little imperious fists beat upon the door and demanded admittance; and somehow Lope was always there within hearing, to turn the key and let the family through. And the family ranged at will over the neglected house, and turned it into a bear garden, at first to the manifest discomfiture of Gideon Boatwright, and afterwards to his very great secret delight.

At first let it be said that the man obstinately told himself he had not changed, and would not give up his scheme of vengeance. Had

anyone asked him at that time—during that first day or two—he would have fiercely contended that this was but part of the deep-laid plot of years; that he had in this fashion penetrated to the family under another name, and would presently carry out his plan to crush them, as he had originally intended. That sentimental business of staring into a fire with a child leaning against him had been but momentary; at least, so he argued to himself when alone. In a cooler time of reasoning he forced himself to remember all he had suffered; strove to harden his heart against these people who were stealing into it. And at such times he was in a mood to nail up the door, and to pay no heed to the little imperious fists hammering at its panels.

Yet the better man prevailed, and the better man began to be stirred to something of pity for those upon whom he had meant to set his heel. He saw the petty shifts to which they were put; noted something of the anxious look of the mother; could not be blind to what he saw nor deaf to what he heard in Poverty Castle. And a great idea came to the man—an idea so strange that had it come to him a week before he would have called himself a madman for even entertaining it.

Almost he blushed whenever the thought occurred to him; and yet he held to it. He

had determined that in his own way he would play the good fairy; would give these people such a Christmas as they had probably never had in their lives before; he would do it all as that mysterious Mr. Smith with whom they had so recently become acquainted. For, after all, he had tried them, and had not found them wanting; had had his own spying met with the utmost frankness; had discovered that Mary Merrigan and her husband and the rest of them bore no resemblance to that scheming, plotting brother John, who had been the ruin, in the beginning at least, of Gideon Boatwright.

It was after a long night, during which Gideon had lain awake in his camp bedstead, staring at the ceiling, and listening to the chiming of the hours from distant clock towers, that he came to that resolution. It was a struggle, and more than once in that long night the man almost changed his mind again. But when at last the morning dawned out of a chill grey sky his final resolution was taken.

"John's dead and gone—and he died in poverty, too; so I suppose in a sense he had his punishment, because by that time I was rich," muttered the man to himself, sitting up in bed in his favourite attitude, with his hands folded round his knees. "So much for John.

His daughter's a fool, but she's rather a nice fool; and I suppose the husband means well. As for the children——" When he came to think of the children he had to rest his forehead on his knees and chuckle; there was no exact word to fit the children. Above all, the stony heart of the man was turned adoringly towards the Scrap.

"She's got the face of an angel and the heart of the devil himself," muttered Gideon Boatwright. "She is all delightful, unadulterated wickedness—and she's so thorough with it. I wonder what she and the Pirate would do to me if by chance I ever offended them?"

That thought brought him out of bed in high good humour—which is to say high good humour for Gideon Boatwright. He forgot to swear at Lope; he even mumbled a long forgotten tune to himself while he warmed his hands at the fire and watched the preparation of breakfast. It was nice to feel good, in a way, —nice, above all things, to have the power of doing what seemed good in his mind, and doing it well.

Now it happened that Mr. Dowsing, that precise lawyer who had first been instrumental in tracing Mary Merrigan, took it into his head that day to make a call upon the strange client who had told him something of a curious

life history. Mr. Dowsing was in the neighbourhood of Kensington, and it occurred to him that he would like to know how Gideon Boatwright was getting on, and how far any impossible scheme of vengeance might have prospered. It was an extraordinary case, and Mr. Dowsing felt that it might have taken an extraordinary turn. Therefore he called at that second house in Quaker's Gardens, and inquired for Gideon Boatwright.

"Look here,—I don't pay you for this, you know," was Gideon's characteristic remark, as the lawyer was shown in. "It's your own time you're wasting; you don't charge me for it."

"I am quite content to waste my time, Mr. Boatwright," said the other, looking round the dingy room as he spoke. "As a matter of fact I gave myself the pleasure of calling upon you, because I wanted to feel sure that you were comfortable. You're a stranger in a strange land——"

"My own land, if it comes to that," broke in Gideon. "Besides, I didn't come here for comfort; I had another purpose in my mind, as I think I told you."

Mr. Dowsing shook his head slowly and pursed up his lips. "Ah! Mr. Boatwright, I had hoped that that was only the whim of a man who had suffered, but who might

be willing to forget," he said. "Surely you have not carried that mad idea any further?"

"Never mind whether it was a mad idea or not," retorted Gideon sharply. "Perhaps you may like to know that I've given it up altogether."

"Indeed, and I'm very glad to know that,' said the lawyer heartily. "I thought you'd come to think better of it. Tell me what has happened."

Gideon Boatwright considered his words for a moment or two before replying; he began to wonder whether or not this man might think him feeble—might even despise him a little for giving up his scheme, after the fashion in which he had spoken of it. "Well, to put the matter shortly," he said at last, "I've seen the people, and have come to know them. I like them; they've won me over to their side—not by fraud or trickery or slavishness—because they don't even know who I really am. But they've taken a lonely old man to their hearts, and have made much of him; and they've snapped that purpose of mine as easily as you might snap a rotten twig. The thing is done with; you must forget that I ever said what I did."

"Willingly—most willingly," assented Dowsing. "It's the best news I've heard for a

long time. And now what are you going to do?"

"I'm going to undo something of what my brother John did for his only daughter," said the old man, with a curious note of pride in his tones. "The best that that scheming, plotting fellow could do was to leave her poor, and to die poor himself; the brother he despised and cast adrift shall make her rich. Not, mind you," he added quickly,—"not that I'm doing it absolutely for her; I'm doing it chiefly on account of some little devils of children." And he began to chuckle again at the remembrance of them.

"Indeed?" Mr. Dowsing raised his eyebrows in some surprise.

"They've just stolen their way into my affections in a manner that to a worse-natured man would be annoying," said Gideon, with a shake of the head. "And so I've made up my mind that I'll do something for 'em. I'm a rich man; it's come about in an extraordinary way that my vengeance is to be of a different sort from anything I ever meant it to be. Though, when you come to think of it," he added grimly, "it'll be about enough to make brother John turn in his grave—won't it?"

"Have you already declared to them who you are? Have you explained what you're going to do?" asked Mr. Dowsing.

Gideon shook his head vigorously. "Oh dear no! not for the world," he replied, sinking his voice to a cautious whisper. "That's the best of it; they don't know who I am. They simply know me as 'Mr. Smith'—a name invented on the spur of the moment. It is as 'Mr. Smith' that they have taken me by the hand; it is as 'Mr. Smith' that I am their friend. That's the beautiful part of it; there's been no bowing down before the rich relative returned from abroad; these people actually like me for myself. Perhaps you think that strange?" he snapped out.

"Not in the least—not in the least," replied the other hurriedly. "It all seems very natural—and very pretty. But I suppose you mean to let them know who you are—eh?"

"Some day—there's plenty of time," Gideon answered. "At the present moment I'm enjoying myself very much; it's a new situation, and I want to make the most of it. But don't talk to me about schemes of vengeance," he added; "I'll have nothing to do with them. My vengeance is of another sort."

So the lawyer went away out of Quaker's Gardens somewhat puzzled; he could not understand how the extraordinary transformation had been brought about; it was altogether outside his experience.

"He's a changed man; he's altogether a different being," said Dowsing.

Gideon Boatwright was indeed so changed a man that he was beginning, for perhaps the first time, to enjoy life as something of a new sensation. His head buzzed with schemes of what he would do for these people and how he would help them; he rubbed his hands at the thought of how they would stare and wonder when they learned that he was not "Mr. Smith" at all, but that mysterious Gideon Boatwright, long ago supposed to be dead, and now returned with hands filled with gold—gold which was for them. Gideon felt that it was like a fairy tale.

It was with something of a shock that when he went down the stairs of the other house that evening, with the pleasant anticipation of sitting down in that family circle and being made much of, he discovered Mr. Leopold Potter seated there, evidently on the most familiar terms with everyone. Knowing what he had set Potter to do, Gideon stopped for a moment in the doorway of the room, looking at him, and evidently wondering whether he should beat a retreat or face the matter out. Nor was Mr. Potter any more certain as to what he should do at that particular moment.

Potter had been away for a day or two—or at least he had not been to Poverty Castle—and he had heard nothing of this strange new friendship with the man who lived next door. Judge of his surprise, then, when he saw that man enter the room unannounced and hatless; he had evidently come from some part of the house in which they sat.

Gideon frowned, and in that frown Leopold Potter saw that he must be cautious and that he must be silent. He rose with alacrity, and was instantly introduced by Chadwick Merrigan.

"Oh, Potter, this is our very good friend Mr. Smith. Mr. Smith lives next door," said the Old Man.

"Pleased to meet you, sir," snapped Gideon, quite as though he had never met the poet before. "You seem surprised to see me coming in, in this unceremonious way; but we've found a way to manage that—haven't we?" He stooped as he spoke, and pinched the cheek of the Scrap.

It was not a particularly joyous evening; some constraint seemed to settle upon them all. Potter wondered in what fashion this new turn of events was to affect himself; Gideon Boatwright wondered if by chance the poet had betrayed his confidence, or would

betray it. The two men lingered there long after Mary Merrigan had gone with the children upstairs—a riotous, roaring procession, to the noise of which Gideon Boatwright listened wistfully.

Chadwick Merrigan smoked thoughtfully, and endeavoured to force conversation with the two men. He did his best to draw out Leopold Potter on the subject of poetry; but Leopold Potter was in too anxious a frame of mind to talk about anything just then. For he knew that in Quaker's Gardens was to be found the only spot on the wide earth where he had friends, and to which he could turn for a refuge; and he was also well aware that in a sense he was dangling between the two houses there, and might at any moment come to the ground. In one he was sure of bed and board when necessary; in the other he might from time to time secure a little money. And yet he suddenly found them in collusion, and he knew that it might happen that both would turn their backs upon him. For he had been treacherous to one at least.

Mary Merrigan came down again, and by that time Gideon Boatwright had obstinately made up his mind that he would sit the other man out. He had a strong objection to going away and leaving himself to be discussed by

Leopold Potter. But even in that Mr. Potter scored.

"I suppose you'll be wanting a bed, Leopold?" said Mary Merrigan presently; and Leopold blushed, and smiled, and confessed that that thought had been in his mind.

That was an end of the matter; Gideon Boatwright was obliged to rise and say "good-night." He determined, however, that he would have a word to say to Leopold Potter before he went; and if the truth be told, Mr. Potter was no less anxious to speak privately to him.

"You see, sir," said Gideon, turning to the poet as he was about to take his leave, "I do not have to go out into the cold; thanks to the goodness of our friends here, I am able to pass from one house to the other. I found a door—and I broke open that door."

"You amaze me," said Mr. Potter.

"Come and see for yourself," said Gideon; and the two passed out from the room together.

Leopold Potter closed the door, and followed his patron a few steps up the stairs. There suddenly Gideon turned, and thrust his face towards the other, who was a step below him.

"How much have you told them? How much do they know?" he whispered fiercely.

"Not a word—not a single solitary word," the poet protested. "But you—what are you doing in this house?"

"I made up my mind to find out something about them — to know for myself what they were like. Of course they don't know who I am, but they shall know presently. You're a good lad," he added, "and I'm obliged to you. Where's your hand?"

He fumbled for the hand of the poet, and having got it, dropped something into it that chinked. The poet began to mumble his gratitude, but was unceremoniously thrust away. Then, as he stood there with a kindling face, having firmly made up his mind to another ode for the morning, he heard the old man mounting the stairs above him. He forgot all about the mysterious door; he dropped the coins in his pocket, and went back to Chadwick Merrigan and his wife.

'Well, and what do you think of the loor?" asked Chadwick.

The poet stared at him; in truth he was a ittle dazed at what had happened. "Door?" ie asked blankly.

"Yes—the door leading from one house to

the other," said the Old Man, lowering his pipe for a moment from his lips. "Didn't you see it?"

Leopold Potter shook his head. "I forgot about the door," he replied feebly.

"But you went out to see it," said Chadwick, staring at him in surprise. "What else did you go out for?"

"I—I don't know," said Potter. "I had a word to say to Mr.—Mr. Smith——"

"But you don't know him—at least, you didn't know him before to-night," Chadwick Merrigan reminded him.

"Oh no—of course not—exactly," faltered the poet. "Of course—you're quite right. How should I know him?"

He was rather overdoing the business, and Mary Merrigan was the first to see it. She leaned towards him with a new gravity in her eyes; he did not meet the look in them. Instead, he feebly jingled the two coins in his pocket, and that jingling was the only sound in the room for at least a minute.

"Leopold Potter," said Mary, keeping her eyes fixed upon him, "you're keeping something from us. What is it?"

The poet kept up that insane jingling, and smiled. It was intended to be a reassuring smile, but as a matter of fact, in the new

importance of his position, it was a sly smile, and nothing else.

"Why, what should I know?" he reminded them. "I've never met this Mr. Smith before to-night; you introduced me yourselves. He's a nice fellow—and a good fellow; that's all I know about him."

Mary Merrigan glanced at her husband; the poet in his nervousness quite unconsciously kept up the jingling. Mary got up, and dropped her hand on the poet's shoulder and shook him.

"Leopold, there's something you've got to tell us," she said; and at the words Chadwick Merrigan laid down his pipe and stared at them both.

"There's absolutely nothing I've got to tell you," said Leopold, with almost an air of impudence; for this new importance was very pleasant. "At least, perhaps I'd better say that there's something I mustn't tell you."

"Leopold Potter,"—Mary was shaking him gently,—"you have money jingling in your pocket. Where did you get it?"

For answer, the poet pulled out the two coins, and, with a grin, showed them lying on his palm. Then he jauntily spun one into the air, and dexterously caught it; then dropped them both back into his pocket.

"Old Man, make him speak," pleaded Mary, turning to her husband.

"I can't make him speak if he won't," said Chadwick. "I don't know what the game is—and perhaps he doesn't either. Better let him alone, and let him go to bed."

"There's some mystery," urged Mary, "and I want to know what it is. Leopold," she went on pleadingly, "we've been your friends more than once, when you needed friends badly. What is happening?" Then, on an inspiration—"Who is Mr. Smith?"

The poet faltered, and looked at her with a dropped jaw. Was it possible that she had fathomed the secret? Quick to follow her advantage, Mary pressed home another question.

"You know who he is? You know something about him? I can see it in your eyes."

"I don't know anything; I'm not allowed to know anything. It's very disgraceful—but I'm poor, and whatever pride I ever had has gone long since," faltered the poor man humbly. "And I'm paid not to say anything."

By this time Chadwick Merrigan was on his feet, and was staring down at the wretched poet. "Yes, that's all very well, Leopold," he said slowly, "but there's a certain duty

you owe to us. We were your friends—your first friends—when you needed friends badly; and although we can't give you money, we expect you to treat us squarely. Now, then—the truth!"

Leopold Potter got up, and went to the door and opened it; peered cautiously outside. Then he closed the door again, and tiptoed back to where Chadwick Merrigan and his wife were standing.

"I see my duty clearly—and after all it doesn't matter," he began. "I am a poor devil that must make what money he can, in whatever way he can; and I've come to the conclusion that I'm a poorer poet than once I thought myself. I have been bought by the rich—but I couldn't help that."

"We'll take all that for granted," exclaimed Chadwick impatiently. "Who is Mr. Smith?"

"Yes—who is Mr. Smith?" echoed Mary.

The poet, regaining that sense of importance, and seeing there was no help for it now, drew himself up, and looked from one eager face to the other. "Can't you guess?" he asked, in a whisper. "Has it never occurred to you as strange that this man should come and live next door—should be so mighty friendly in a short time? He has come to spy out the land."

"But why?" It was Mary who asked the question blankly enough.

"His name isn't Smith at all," said the poet. "I have known who he is for some time, but I have been sworn to secrecy. I am sworn to secrecy now, but I can't help myself. This man who has forced his way into your house is a certain rich relative, who has come thousands of miles across the sea to find you."

"Stuff and nonsense!" exclaimed Chadwick Merrigan, with a roar of laughter. "We have no rich relatives."

"Wait," interposed Mary quickly. "What is his name?"

"I only found out his name by the merest chance; I saw a letter that had come for him," said the poet, with a glance at the door. "It is Gideon Boatwright."

"Gideon Boatwright!" exclaimed Mary. "My father's brother—the man who was turned out of house and home, years and years ago." She turned a puzzled face to her husband. "Old Man, what does it all mean?"

"It means," broke in the poet, "that he has come back all this way to find you. It means that he is a very lonely man, and that he means to do great things for you and for the children. He told me so himself.

He employed me to tell him all I knew about you."

Mary was looking at her husband with a face that was gradually changing. At first the look upon it was one of sheer amazement; then gradually that look faded, and a more radiant one took its place. For in an instant it seemed that so many puzzling things were explained.

"I understand it all," she exclaimed, turning to Chadwick. "His masterful way—his forcing himself in here as though he had a right—his many questions concerning us and all we did. He told us he was lonely—told us that he wanted to see something of the children. Chadwick, isn't it wonderful!"

"And it's all so beautifully done," said Chadwick the romancist. "No blurting out the truth; no parade of his wealth—— You did say he was wealthy, Leopold?"

"He told me he had lots of money," said the poet. "More than that—it's a most extraordinary thing, but it's absolutely true—he wanted me to persuade you to be extravagant."

"Extravagant?" Chadwick looked puzzled.

"Yes." The poet nodded vigorously. "I pointed out to him that you had no money; and in reply to that he said, 'What does that matter, when there's a rich man behind

them, ready to help them when the time comes?'"

"He said that?" Mary glanced quickly at her husband.

"He did—and I am convinced he meant it," said Leopold. "The only thing is that he has made up his mind that he will declare himself only when it suits him to do so; for the present he remains 'Mr. Smith.' Now that you know everything, I don't mind telling you that he—he bribed me to-night—paid me this money to keep silent a little longer. Not, of course, that that was necessary," he added quickly.

Mary was clinging to her husband; almost she was on the verge of tears. "It's beastly—and it's selfish—and it's mean," she said, "but I think this is the happiest night of my life. This wonderful old man—the only relative I have in the world—has come here to help us; and we know that he has taken a liking for us already. Old Man, you'll never have to worry any more."

Chadwick Merrigan straightened himself, and expanded his chest. "It's perfectly wonderful!" he said. "And there's nothing mean about it, Mary; if this uncle of yours has no one else in the world to care for, I don't see why he shouldn't care for us. Only we must dissemble, as they say in the plays; he must

still be 'Mr. Smith' to us. Lord!—he wants us to be extravagant—does he? What a Christmas we can have, after all!"

He seized the poet by the hand, and shook that hand, and buffeted the owner of it, until those two coins in the poet's pocket rattled and jingled again.

CHAPTER VIII

THE MAGIC DOOR CLOSES

GIDEON BOATWRIGHT was not a man to do anything by halves. That curious swing of the pendulum which had brought him, in a moment as it were, straight from bitter hatred of people he had never seen to a growing love for them on acquaintance, was likely to send him headlong upon any course that should prove his repentance. He had declared that he would give these people such a Christmas as they had not had yet; knowing nothing about it from experience, he yet determined that he would be extravagant in a traditional way—with roaring fires, and groaning boards, and all the rest of it. He would be a very Santa Claus—not to drop upon them by way of the chimneypots, but by that other magic way he had found for himself.

He found a satisfaction in going out and looking at the shops—deciding in his own mind how he would buy this for the Pirate,

and that for the Scrap; and this other for the Angel, and that further one for Fatima. It would have to be done quickly, because the time was growing short—only a matter of a few days. He thought that it wouldn't be a bad idea if, with a mere wave of his golden wand, he transformed his own place into a Christmas palace for the day, with a feast spread there; he knew the thing could be done, and at a price he was prepared to pay. But meanwhile, until the time arrived, he could enjoy that sensation of being the man of mystery, while those in Poverty Castle did not even suspect who he was.

Of course it has to be remembered that Chadwick Merrigan and his wife were playing a part—were doing that business of dissembling, as Chadwick had suggested—and finding it something of a task. For the Old Man was as open and as innocent as the day; in his own impulsive fashion he wanted to rush straight at Gideon Boatwright the moment he appeared, and grasp his hand, and tell him that he was welcome in his new character, and that they knew all about him. But that, of course, would never do at all; they must await the pleasure of this rich old man, who had come far over the seas to find them, and who had declared his intention to lift all their troubles from them. He must still be "Mr.

Smith" to them; it might spoil everything if he suspected that they knew.

It was rendered the more difficult because Leopold Potter, in his gratitude, and in his anxiety lest this new treachery should be discovered, insisted upon keeping Gideon Boatwright as well as the family in sight. Almost it may be said that he hovered on Gideon's doorstep; certain it is that in the course of twenty-four hours no less than four odes went far towards blocking the letter-box. Also he spent much time with Chadwick Merrigan; in fact, he kept a general guard over Quaker's Gardens, watching all and sundry who came in, and fearing disaster with every moment that passed. Thus it happened that he was present on that evening immediately following the night of the disclosure, when Gideon Boatwright (in the character of "Mr. Smith," as he supposed) came down to smoke a pipe in the midst of that family he had discovered.

Chadwick Merrigan and Mary were bound, of course, to look upon the man with new eyes; for already his commonplace figure was touched with romance and mystery. Before, he had been that ordinary "Mr. Smith" in whom they were mildly interested; now he towered a gigantic figure, holding power in his hands. He could make them; he could lift them above want; he could touch their sordid lives (sordid,

of course, in the monetary sense) with a golden light they had never been touched with before. They had remembered during the day old stories about this mysterious man—his wild youth, and the sudden cutting of himself off from everyone, and his threat to come back when he had made his fortune. Well, he had made his fortune, and here he was back again, under a disguise, and sitting actually in their midst.

If on that evening they paid him a little extra attention—if an easier chair was found for him, and if Mrs. Merrigan went out of her way to be pleasant to this strange old man she had rather disliked and distrusted before—who shall blame them? They were filled with gratitude to this man, and they were denied the opportunity of expressing it verbally; they could only do it by little acts of extra kindness to him. He went away well pleased with his visit, and chuckling to himself to think how great a mystery he still was to them all.

Those he left behind felt more like conspirators than he did. It became a matter almost of laying three heads together—the heads of Chadwick and Mary and the poet.

"He doesn't suspect," whispered Chadwick, with a glance at the door. "Personally, I think I was most careless and off-handed with him."

"I was, precisely the same as I was before I knew the secret," said Mary. "Do you know, there's something about his face that I like a great deal more than I did at first?"

The poet added encouragement. "You were both splendid," he said. "He'll never suspect; and he'll feel that he's springing a great surprise upon you when he tells his wonderful story. But you must keep it up—you must keep it up."

Gideon Boatwright saw the world through new eyes; he strove to think, a thousand times a day, of what he could do for these people who had so suddenly taught him what life was like. What a fool he had been, he thought again and again; he that had had wealth in his hands all these years, and had brought his life down to a mere matter of scheming for more wealth, and of eating and drinking and sleeping. And these people, who had had no wealth at all, had made quite a merry business of living, and had touched a thousand pleasures of which he knew nothing. So much he had lost; so much was there to make up.

And curiously enough he was being taught that new business of pleasure-giving in quite a providential way. Only this morning, for instance, wandering alone through Kensington,

with his hands clasped behind him, watching the people and the shops, and all the beginning of that glowing business of Christmas, he suddenly came upon the Pirate and the Scrap jogging along in front of him. In the very act of overtaking them and speaking to them he stopped; for the Pirate and the Scrap were going through some small business on their own account—something prearranged. He stole nearer to them, to overhear what they were saying.

They were passing a great shop, with its windows piled high with toys of every sort and description; and the Scrap stopped with a jerk and faced the Pirate. Yet neither of them looked at that seductive window.

"Pirate," said the Scrap, in her clear high treble, "do you really think that these infantile things come up to what they were a few years ago?"

The Pirate shook his head, and laughed a hollow laugh. "This is an age of—an age of —of materia . . . oh! you know the word that the Old Man uses . . . and you can't expect them to be done for the money. Everything's cheapened."

"Do you really think, Pirate, that that engine, with the real steam, and the brake, and all the rest of it, was what would appeal to you? Speak, my Pirate!"

"I wouldn't have the word-you-mustn't-say thing at a gift," said the Pirate, regarding the sky gloomily. "And what price that doll, with two changes of clothes? Aren't you getting a bit old for dolls?"

Did the Scrap turn her head the very faintest towards the window of the shop? Perish the thought! Instead she said bravely, "You really have a very sufficing sort of mind, Pirate, for knowing what other people are thinking. Yet there's a boy there," she went on, her lips tightening—"I mean the boy with the bumpy parcel who's just come out. Look at him; he's smiling."

"I see him," said the Pirate darkly. "Say the word, and I can bump him into somebody, and make him drop——"

"Better not, perhaps," said the Scrap, with a sigh. "Come on—and walk as if you were pleased."

Yet they went on together with bent heads.

So it happened that Gideon Boatwright went into the shop, and purchased that engine with the real steam (it was warranted not to blow up) and the brake and everything, to say nothing of that doll with the two changes of clothing. He was minutely careful about the items of clothing, somewhat to the embarrassment of the young lady who sold him the doll. Also it happened that there were

Gde B tveght sit on t e floo en g hs rey tr s res

other things to be bought; and Gideon waved his hand impatiently at the mention of prices. For he was doing the thing royally, and he was to be rewarded by the smiles of bright eyes and perhaps with a touch of little lips upon his face. Altogether it was rather a cumbrous package that staggered into Quaker's Gardens that night, under cover of the darkness, and supported by a phlegmatic youth, who did not seem to be moved in the least by the wonder of the things he bore. But then perhaps he had not packed them.

Gideon spread them out on the floor; and so presented the rare appearance of an elderly gentleman with a long grey beard winding up clockwork toys, and fumbling with cranks and pins and what not; and even striving to teach a remarkably large doll to walk or stand upright. In the very midst of these occupations he was surprised by the entrance of Lope; and Lope leaned against the wall, and stared as though he felt that his master had suddenly gone mad. Gideon Boatwright sat on the floor among his new treasures, and grinned amiably at Lope.

"Well, my Gnome, why do you look like that?" he demanded, but not at all roughly. "There are more fools than you in the world, it seems. You heard children's voices the other night—and I have heard them since.

We've been fools, Lope; we've missed things that childish eyes have seen—failed to touch things to which little childish hands might have drawn us. We're not so old yet, Gnome, but what we can begin again; and we'll have the best masters and mistresses in the world to teach us what to do."

That queer Gnome limped forward, and stared down at the toys and at his master. "Do you mean it?" he asked, in a whisper. "Do you mean that you're going to give them this—all this,"—he pointed to the heap on the floor,—"and more?"

"Oh yes—ever so much more," said Gideon, with a nod. "Think for a moment what it all means! Think for a moment what I'm going to do! They don't know who I am; they think me a poor creature of the name of Smith—a lonely old man, glad to creep in amongst them for the sake of company—for the sake of the warmth of their fire. They shall know who I am on Christmas night; I'll give them such a surprise as they haven't had yet. There's never been anything like it before; there's never been a man come back from the grave, to fill their hands with gifts. They've been poor and needy, Lope; even the children have felt the pinch of that; now they shall feel it no more. I never meant to do this; but it seems

as if I had been made to do it. It's a grand scheme, Lope; it'll be more than worth the money."

"What else are you going to do, master?" demanded the man.

"I'll pay out money by the handful; there are people in this great city who can build up a palace almost in a night. Those people shall transform this house; and we'll lay a feast here that shan't be forgotten for a long time to come. I'm going to arrange it all to-morrow; I'm going to settle everything. There's four days yet; Mr. Smith and the Gnome shall send out their invitations. Don't grin at me like that, you dog," he went on, pretending to aim a vicious blow at the smiling Lope. "I believe you're as pleased as I am."

But the vigour of his master was to surprise even Lope, who knew most about him. For Gideon was in and out of the place forty times in the day—ordering this, and countermanding the orders for something better; arranging about that; secretly sett'ing some other matter. Parcels and packages began to arrive in the most surprising fashion, until Lope was in a whirl, and scarcely knew where to bestow the things that were thrust upon him. In fact, Lope's world had changed surprisingly; he scarcely knew this extraordinary Gideon Boat-

wright, who had come to life after many years, and had risen, as it were, out of the ashes of a grim, stern old man, who had ruled Lope and everyone else with a hand of steel. Presently, perhaps, Lope might wake up, and might find the grim, stern old man returned; but for the present he was grateful for the change, and made the most of it.

As for those enemies of Poverty Castle, the tradespeople, they had suddenly discovered that if Poverty Castle did not pay, the strange man who lived in the adjoining house did. There was no running of bills here; everything was paid for exactly as it was bought—"On the nail," as Gideon expressed it.

Thus you may imagine that everything was going very well, and that metaphorically speaking the flag of Hope was hoisted on the battlements of Poverty Castle. At all events, Poverty Castle felt that it could show a brave front to its besiegers, with that secret knowledge it held.

And then there came into the business Mr. Leopold Potter. In mercy to him let it be said that never in the whole course of an erratic and poverty-stricken career had he become possessed of the sum of three sovereigns in a little more than a week—and that, too, with the prospect of coming into other sums in a rosy future. Let it be added that in his

poor starved existence, wherein at times he had fallen so low as to be compelled to sleep in the streets, he had never known what luxury was; and here he grasped it with both hands. Small wonder that he fed himself as he had never been fed before; small wonder that, assuring himself that he was but following the example of greater men before him, he partook of Christmas cheer in a fashion that mounted swiftly to his particularly weak head, and played strange pranks with his brain.

So that, at the time Gideon Boatwright was gloating over his store of toys and Christmas goods, and was dreaming that fond and foolish dream of his, Mr. Leopold Potter felt a very muddled conscience arise within him that drove him straight into Quaker's Gardens. He came with a purpose, and that purpose was honesty; he talked to himself in every sort of rhymed and unrhymed language; and he told himself that he must see his patron, and must tell that patron what he had done. It would be all right; of that there was no possible doubt. Already he saw himself shaking hands with that patron, and being blessed by him for all that he had done in the patron's cause. So, somewhat unsteadily, he made for the house occupied by Gideon Boatwright, and knocked upon the door.

"What I shall do," said the poet to himself, choosing his words carefully, and beating time to them to an imaginary audience in Quaker's Gardens,—"what I shall do will be to show him the real beauty of these people; that they've taken to him from the first; that they—they pene—penetrated his disguise; that they're only waiting to fall upon his neck——"

At that moment Lope opened that door, and Leopold Potter, with his hat in his hand, smilingly entered. Knowing him to be a privileged person, Lope, after a suspicious look at him, ushered him into the presence of Gideon Boatwright, where, fortunately for his dignity, the poet sat down unbidden.

"Hullo! my friend," said Gideon, too much at peace with all the world to quarrel with the poet or anyone else just then, "you look as if you'd been celebrating Christmas somewhat early. What's the matter with you?"

"Nothing," said Mr. Potter, blinking his eyelids, and sitting very upright. "There's abso—abso—really nothing the matter with me at all. But I've got news for you."

"Then let's have it," said Gideon. "Is it another ode—or have you come into a fortune —or what is it?"

Waggishly enough, Leopold Potter put a

finger to the side of his nose, and chuckled. "It's something — something you ought to know," he said. "It's about—about the people next door."

"Oh, don't you worry about them," said Gideon, who was busily inspecting that miraculous steam engine he had bought for the Pirate. "I flatter myself I know more about them than you can tell me."

"But you don't know this," said Potter, leaning forward impressively, and almost overbalancing himself. "You think you know—but you don't. There's only one person that really knows all about everything—and that's me." He touched himself on the breast—not always hitting the same place.

"Yes, I should have gathered that, from the look of you," said Gideon drily.

"What you don't know," went on Potter, "is that they understand that you're not Mr. Smith—and that you never were Mr. Smith."

Gideon Boatwright slowly lowered the toy he held to the floor, and rose to his feet; he had been kneeling there, a little foolishly perhaps, among those emblems of the newer nature that had come to him. "I'm afraid I don't understand," he said, in almost a whisper.

"That's what I'm here to tell you," said

the poet. "They know all about you; they've known all about you for—for—ever so long." He seemed to make one word of it as he waved his hands vaguely.

"Do you mean to tell me," asked Gideon slowly,—"do you want me to understand that these people have known that I was related to them—for ever so long—and still have spoken to me as 'Mr. Smith'—still pretended to believe that they didn't know me by any other name? Answer me!" He snapped out the last words in such a voice that the wretched man jumped, and sat very upright, and blinked his eyelids again.

"It wasn't—wasn't exactly my fault," said Leopold. "One word led to another; they guessed almost at once. I didn't see any harm in telling them that you were not Mr. Smith."

"Of course you wouldn't see any harm in it," said Gideon; and it was remarkable that within these few minutes it seemed as though he had shrunk back into something of his old suspicious, dried-up self. "What else did you tell them?"

"I only told them—at least I think I told 'em," he answered vaguely, "that you were going to pay for their—their extravagance. I said they needn't bother about it, because there was a rich man behind them. That seemed to please

'em," added Mr. Potter, with a smile, —"you've no idea how that pleased 'em."

"I should think it did," said Gideon Boatwright, without looking at the other man. "And so they've known all about me—and they've let me sit there night after night—and they've let the children—here—— *You* can go, at any rate." He pulled open the door as he spoke, and jerked his head to indicate that the man should pass out.

"Go?" said the poet blankly.

"Yes—go. It's a simple word, and one you're not likely to forget. And don't come back again. I've done with you, as I've done with the others. The work I paid you for you've accomplished — with something else thrown in; I'm obliged to you. Now, clear out!"

Leopold Potter got up from his chair, and very slowly and very dejectedly made for the door. He paused there for a moment, and opened his mouth to speak; but the grim face before him was sufficient to silence him; he dropped his head and his hands, and walked out of the room, and out of the house.

He was afraid to go to Poverty Castle, or to let them know the dire news; they would hear that soon enough, apart from him. He slunk away out into the great world of London, realising, now that it was too late, that that

sudden fortune of his had melted into thin air.

And the man who was left behind? He stood for a long time, with his packages spread about him—the visible signs of the ruin of all his hopes. He had trusted these people—had taken them into that locked place in his heart that had for so long been empty; he had been prepared to pour out upon them a wealth of love that had been accumulating through the years. And they had received it all with tongues in their cheeks, knowing perfectly well who he was, and playing up to his mood of mystery!

"I will be strictly just," he said to himself. "After all, that poor fool may be wrong; one shouldn't trust a drunken man in such a matter as this. I'll stand face to face with these people; I'll have the truth from them."

He climbed the stairs to that door through which he had passed with so light a heart more than once lately; opened it, and went down into the other house. He stalked straight in where Chadwick Merrigan and his wife were seated; there, in the old attitude, the Pirate sprawled on his face on the hearth-rug, and the Scrap sat near him. Mary Merrigan sprang to her feet, with a smile of welcome.

But the old man stayed her with a gesture.

"Let no one move for me," he said; "my visit is a short one."

The children looked at him with startled faces; Chadwick Merrigan laid down his pipe. "Is anything the matter?" he asked.

"I don't know yet," replied the old man. "You can send these young people to bed; I want to talk to you both."

"Mighty humpy," commented the Pirate, as he got slowly to his feet. "What's the row, Mr. Smith?"

Gideon did not answer; he was waiting doggedly, and watching that arch-conspirator Chadwick Merrigan. As in every other crisis in the family, the younger members had to be considered; and they were scarcely the sort of poeple to be hustled off to bed at the bidding of a stranger; for that's what Gideon Boatwright was to them. Mary Merrigan saved the situation by a timely suggestion.

"It's scarcely their bedtime yet," she said softly; "but won't you come into the other room, if you've anything to say to us?"

"Very well," said Gideon, with a nod. "I won't detain you long."

Chadwick took up a lamp that stood on the table, and went before them into another room. For a long time afterwards Gideon Boatwright remembered how he stood there, in a room that was chilly, and which was large enough for the

lamp not to light all the corners of it; he remembered how Chadwick set the lamp down on the table, and how they both stood, with that lamp between them and him, looking at him with scared faces. For there was disaster in the very air.

"It's only a very simple matter," said Gideon Boatwright, "and I can settle it in a matter of a moment or two. You won't object to answering one or two simple questions, I suppose?"

"Not in the least," Chadwick Merrigan replied, with an uneasy glance at Mary. "Anything you like. But for God's sake don't be tragic about it!"

"Oh, there's nothing tragic about it," said the old man bitterly; "it's only rather funny, I suppose. The first question is: What do you know about me?"

"Nothing very much," replied Mary, seeing, with the quick instinct of a woman, in what direction the questions were tending.

"Do you or do you not know my real name?" He stood there grimly enough, with his arms folded, looking at the two uneasy faces. "Answer me!"

"Well—yes—we do," said Chadwick Merrigan, blurting out the truth. "I don't mind confessing that much, at least."

"And yet you've called me by that other

name—have given me a sort of welcome as a stranger—knowing all the time that I was Gideon Boatwright—knowing why I was here—what I had come for."

"It was your whim to be called by another name," Mary reminded him. "It was not for us to pry into your secrets."

"You knew them; you found out from a poor fool whom I trusted," went on Gideon, with rising wrath, "all about me, and what I had come to do. And then you cheated me—then you made a fool of me; made me believe that you still thought me the stranger I apparently was when I came amongst you. Why couldn't you be honest with me?"

There was no answer to that—save the answer they could not give. They might have said that he was scarcely the type of man with whom they dared be honest; that for their own sakes it was better that he should not know that they had penetrated his secret. While they hesitated he went on again, bitterly enough.

"All my life men have tried to cheat me; all my life men have said one thing to my face smilingly, and another to my back; and I had got used to that. When I came here, and came to meet you first, it seemed to me that I had found someone honest—someone who, no matter how badly the world had

treated them, at least had tried to do the square thing, and perhaps for that reason had found that the world wouldn't do the square thing by them. I told myself that here was something I had not met before. And before God I was glad."

"You don't understand," broke in Chadwick; but again the old man checked him.

"I understand perfectly. I'll tell you now why I came to England—and what I meant to do; I'll show you what you might have gained—and what you've lost." He took a turn or two about the room, and came back to where they stood, and looked at them.

"I came to England a soured and embittered man," he said. "I came to England with my mind made up to the righting of an old wrong—the settling of an old score that had waited years for settlement. Your father turned me out of doors—robbed me of that which was mine—brought my father's curse upon me. He was my elder brother, and he's dead; I am glad that I did not meet him as I meet you."

He spoke the words to Mary, who looked at him with her chin uplifted, but who said never a word.

"I employed people to search for you and to find out all about you," he went on. "Then I took the house next to this, with the purpose in my mind to carry out the vengeance I had

meant to carry out as regarded my brother. He was gone—but his daughter remained; and I meant to let that old vengeance fall on you. Then I saw you—and I saw the children; and the thing fell away from me like an old and ragged garment that I had no use for. My purpose was dead; my vengeance was done."

"I like you for saying that—if I like you for nothing else," said Mary.

"I told myself that you were honest—that you were frank and open," the old man went on, "but in that I was mistaken. I believed that the taint in my brother had not fallen upon his child; you were both of you, I thought, something better than I had met before. In that I was mistaken. You found out who I was; yet you lived a lie to me, and spoke to me as though you still believed me to be the stranger who had come into your house under another name."

"We only heard by the merest chance who you were," said Chadwick, looking helplessly at his wife.

"Did you know what I intended to do for you?" demanded Gideon. "Tell me that."

"Yes—we did," replied Chadwick.

"And, knowing that, still kept silence," said Gideon. "I tell you this now, as surely as I know it in my heart: there is no truth nor honesty in the world. I believed there was;

I was fool enough to set my poor wisdom against the wisdom of men greater than myself, who have declared over and over again that there is no truth nor honesty in the world. I thought I had found it; I was wrong. You saw me as a rich old man; you scented my money-bags; and so you wanted to cheat me, for the sake of them. And I suppose no one would have been more surprised than you would have been, when in due course I came to declare who I was—eh?"

So much had been in their minds, innocently enough, and they could not deny it now. They had felt that, as it had been the old man's wish that he should come among them as a stranger, they must respect that wish, if they would please him at all; and in that unlucky moment when they had gained the knowledge of who he really was, they saw, now when it was too late, that in lighting upon his plan they had cheated him of his victory, and had given him his suspicion of them. It was a muddle—a blunder; but it was not to be repaired now.

"I've done with you; you will never see me again, except by accident," went on Gideon. "The door I so unwarrantably broke open will be locked by me to-night; and it will never be opened again. I shall leave England within the next few days. Good-night to you—and good-bye!"

He was moving towards the door when Mary's voice recalled him. "Do you know what 'good-bye' means?" she asked.

He stopped, and glanced back at her. "Not exactly," he replied. "What does it mean?"

Her voice faltered a little. "It means—'God be with you!'" she said.

"Then I'll say that—for the children—because they didn't know," he answered. "Good-bye, to them!"

The door opened, and he went out; they heard his slow feet ascending the stairs. He paused for a moment on his way up; then shrugged his shoulders, and went on. The door he had found opened, and let him through; then he closed it, and turned the key in it, and took the key out. Carrying that in his hand, he went down into his own house.

Lope, meeting him with that smile that had had its birth only in that house, changed the smile hurriedly when he saw the savage face of the man who seemed to have grown in an hour or so into the old hard master of the old hard years. It being necessary to say something to Lope with regard to the future, Gideon Boatwright stopped, and tapped the key he held upon the palm of his other hand.

"Understand me," he said, "that that door has been locked for the last time; it will be opened no more. If there are people living

in the next house, I know nothing of them; if by chance anyone should knock upon that door, it is not to be opened. I want no words about it; do you understand?"

Lope nodded slowly, with a great wonder in his eyes. "I understand, master," he said.

Gideon Boatwright flung up a window in the room; it looked out on to the dank, neglected garden at the back of the house. He flung the key out, so that it fell without sound among the tangled growth of grass and weeds and bushes.

"So much for that!" he said. "Now, get me a hammer."

"A hammer?" faltered Lope.

"Yes, dolt! — a hammer. Don't I speak plainly?" thundered Gideon.

The man came back after an interval; Gideon snatched the heavy hammer from his hand. He went into that room where all the toys were spread about; after looking at them moodily for a moment, he dropped to his knees, and fell to work upon them like a madman, beating them to pieces, and tossing the fragments from him. Then presently he went up to his room, and shut himself in, and got to bed. And that night when he slept he turned his face to the wall.

But the Gnome did not sleep. He lay listening for a long time, until he knew that his

master was safe for the night; then he huddled on his clothes, and crept downstairs, and out of the house. He went into that neglected garden at the back, and, with wary eyes upon the windows of the house, began painfully groping about in the darkness.

The Gnome was searching for a key.

CHAPTER IX

"THOU SHALT NOT FORGET!"

PERHAPS it is scarcely necessary to state that Chadwick Merrigan, even in the limited time given to him before this flinging down of any castles he may have built in the air, had duly exercised his supposed right to be extravagant. Extravagance was in the very nature of the man; with the certainty that his future would be a rich one, he had not hesitated to launch out. More than that, after their long period of privation, and much watching of each coin that went out, they were ready enough—both Chadwick and his wife—to drop hints that there need be no more fear on the part of those who served them as to ultimate payments being made.

So also in the case of Miss Wicks. She had plotted and schemed for a long time to keep the family afloat; she saw suddenly the prospect that she might not have to plot and scheme in that way any longer. Never-

theless, as subtlety and cunning were in her very bones, she set to work now to scatter hints on her own account broadcast; and to allow it to be clearly understood that as a matter of fact when that great day should arrive when money should flow out of Poverty Castle as it had never flowed in, she might think seriously of changing the butcher and the baker and the rest, if by chance they did not exactly please her.

But with the locking of that door that had seemed to show the way to wealth a change came over everything. Gideon Boatwright, having once got into his warped and twisted mind the idea that these people had meant to cheat him, and to rob him for their own greedy ends, was not the sort of man to dismiss that idea in a hurry; above all, he was not the sort of man to take any mere negative action in the matter. What he had set his hand to do he meant to do with considerable thoroughness; so that it happened that within a very few hours he too went about dropping hints. And the strange part was that although he had but a day or two before planned to do this very thing which Chadwick Merrigan and his wife, with the assistance of the redoubtable Wicks, had already done, he was in a furious state of indignation at the idea that they should have done it at all. The mere suggestion that there

had been talk (though this last was only by Wicks) of a rich relative, who was suddenly coming to the rescue of that beleaguered Poverty Castle, caused him to close his teeth grimly, and to determine that these people who had counted their chickens before they were hatched, even though he had suggested that counting, should find how great a mistake they had made. Therefore his hints were stronger even than those of the others had been; and, as a man who paid his bills the moment they were presented, he was listened to with respect when he pointed out that the family were not worth a farthing.

"You'll never get your money—unless by a miracle," he said here and there. "Starve 'em out; refuse to let them have anything more; take my word for it—and I'm a business man—it's a losing game—at least for you."

So a sort of panic seized upon the tradespeople, and but for the fact that it was within some three days of Christmas, with the prospect of an extremely busy time before them, they would in all probability have descended then and there upon Poverty Castle, and swept it bare. Instead, they contented themselves with demands and ultimatums, and with the sudden stoppage of supplies. Whereupon Wicks, reduced once more to despair,

sobbed violently over the preparation of such food as was left; and again wished (not for the first time, by any means) that she had never been born.

It had, of course, become necessary to break to the family the astounding news that the Magic Door was closed, and would never again be opened. For it had happened that the Pirate, in particular, had been most anxious to know what was the matter with Mr. Smith, and why that gentleman had gone away, after his strange interview with Chadwick and Mary, and had not come back again. He was an excitement—an adventure in himself; they could not lightly let him go. So, on that first evening when the disastrous thing fell full upon them, Chadwick went back into the room where the children had been left, with despair writ large upon his face, and with his hands thrust deep into his pockets. Mary, coming after him, had a tragic enough face too.

"Where's Mr. Smith?" the Pirate had demanded.

"Gone—and he's never coming back," said Chadwick Merrigan savagely. "And you mustn't speak of him again—never at any time."

"But why not, Old Man?" asked the Scrap, in perplexity. "If you've found out anything horrid about him, that only makes him all the

nicer; there are a great deal too many good people in this world for me."

"Same here," supplemented the Pirate, with a nod. "You'd better tell us all you know, Old Man; we shall only screw it out of you in the long run."

Chadwick Merrigan laughed in spite of himself. "There's nothing to tell you," he said. "But your Mr. Smith is an old devil!"

"When next I meet him I'll tell him so," said the Scrap sweetly.

"You mustn't," exclaimed Mary hurriedly, shaking her head at Chadwick. "It's a word you mustn't say." Which, being a formula in that family, was likely to be respected.

But perhaps at that time the man most to be pitied was Gideon Boatwright. For he had lost so much; had suddenly seen the hopes that he had so gladly built up swept away from him. All his life had been a thing of hardness and bitterness, and he had grasped eagerly the chance to be hard and bitter no longer. And then he had found—or thought he had found—that these people whom he had trusted of all the world had failed him also. That mad instinct which had made him smash the toys he had bought for the children made him long to wreck the world that had given him nothing but the wealth he didn't want, and destroy everything in it. He walked the streets at

that joyous season of the year a man apart—eating his heart out with rage at what had happened.

He felt he could stand the house no longer; it was hateful to him. Moreover, it was haunted; a dozen times in an hour he could have sworn he heard the patter of quick feet on the stairs—heard some childish voice calling "Mr. Smith." It was not to be endured; he must get away out of the place—must even leave England if necessary, and, leaving it, leave behind him the remembrance of what he had suffered.

On that first day he called Lope to him, and in the old manner gave him instructions as to what he should do.

"For the present you will remain here; you will order such things as are necessary for yourself—and nothing more. I'll give you an address to which you can send bills and letters; the bills I will discharge myself. And understand clearly you are to have nothing to do with the people next door; I don't permit it. That part of my life is closed—done with—forgotten. You know me, and you know by this time that my orders are to be carried out—eh?"

"Yes, master," said Lope, his eyes eagerly devouring the other man's face.

"I'm going away from here," said Gideon

Boatwright. "I shall probably take a lodging in some other part of London, or go to an hotel, until I can make up my mind what to do with this place, and with you. If anyone asks for me, you don't know where I am—nor when I shall come back—nor anything about me. Is that clear?"

"Yes, master," replied Lope; and though his eyes and his tongue were obedient, it was curious that while he spoke he fingered a key that lay hidden in his pocket.

But although Gideon Boatwright went away, and took a room in an obscure hotel at the other end of London, it was strange that he should come back. Had anyone told him that he was bound to come back, drawn by some power he could not resist, he would have laughed the idea to scorn in characteristic fashion; yet so it was. Though by day he wandered in other parts of London, he was haunted always by the thought of Quaker's Gardens, and what was happening there; no matter in what direction he turned, he came back always to that spot where for the first time, in the true meaning of the word, he had lived.

And in one of these excursions, on the very first day after that door had been locked and the man had gone away, his very vindictiveness and his hatred of these people who had

tricked him prompted him to another act of vengeance. He felt he had not done enough; they might yet slip through his fingers—might yet contrive, in some fashion or other, to keep their heads above water; might even be laughing at him and at the futility of his threats. That must never be; he must go back, and must find some other means of vengeance.

They still had a roof above their heads; and that was the fault of a soft-hearted, sentimental landlord. He would seek out Burls; he would insist—demand that these people who could not even pay their rent should be turned out. The thing was monstrous—unbusinesslike—not to be endured in any country where rents and rates and taxes were a first consideration. The man Burls must be told in pretty plain terms that this thing could not be; it must be pointed out to him that he owed a duty, not to himself alone, but to society at large, and that this sort of people must not be encouraged. Fanning the flame of his anger with these arguments as he went along, he made straight for the shop of Mr. Burls, and came to it at last with a very fine wrath upon him. But he came, as it happened, at an unfortunate time.

Wicks had at that time but one friendly bosom (speaking always, of course, in the

most modest sense) on which she could lean; and that was the bosom of Burls. Burls had proved a very tower of strength at a moment when there was no other tower of strength to be discovered; moreover, there was that sentimental side of Burls which had been touched, and might be touched again, to the actual advantage of Wicks herself. Wicks had had a hard life of it, and despite her devotion to Poverty Castle it is scarcely surprising that she thought often of Mr. Burls, and of that little parlour behind his workshop, and of the easy-chair in which she had so recently sat. Moreover, the sight of Mr. Burls of an evening, strolling under the leafless trees in Quaker's Gardens, in his best suit of clothes, and with a very green-looking cigar between his lips, was some compensation for the anxieties and terrors of the day that was past. Somehow it seemed to poor Wicks that no great disaster could come into Quaker's Gardens while that strange sort of bodyguard perambulated its pavements.

Thus it happened that when tradesmen ceased to call for orders, and defied Miss Wicks to her very teeth when she indignantly waited upon them, she thought tearfully in the first place of Burls; and, snatching a moment, after a heated argument with a butcher whom she left in a state of collapse,

she went to Mr. Burls' establishment, and pushed open the door and walked in. Mr. Burls, with a stump of pencil resting against a very large tongue, was apparently in deep cogitation over some accounts in a long, narrow book.

"Oh!" exclaimed Wicks, sitting plump down upon a packing-case, and closing her eyes and clenching her teeth, — "oh! — what a world!"

Mr. Burls under the alarming impression that Wicks was about to faint, slipped the piece of pencil into his pocket and proceeded energetically to fan the lady with the long book he held. In a moment or two, under that reviving process, Miss Wicks opened her eyes, and smiled faintly, and shook her head at him.

"Oh—you men!" exclaimed Miss Wicks.

"Which, seein' as there's only one of me, ain't easy to be understood," said Mr. Burls slowly. "You seem upset, Miss; might I suggest the parlour as more private and"— Burls blushed—"more 'omelike?"

Wicks consented to walk into the parlour, and even to sit in that easy-chair which she had graced once before. Mr. Burls stood looking at her in deep admiration while she recovered herself a little; presently she looked up at him and shook her head again, with a

touch of whimsicality for him and of pity for herself.

"Mr. Burls—Mr. Burls—we are starving!" she said.

Burls looked hopelessly round, as though in search of provisions; even fixed a slow eye upon a cupboard in a corner.

"Oh, I'm not talking about myself," said Wicks sharply. "I'm simply talking about those blessed infants—big and little—up in Quaker's Gardens. There's precious little in the house—and there's no more to come in. Everybody's found us out; if we don't pay something we shall get nothing more to eat. Mr. Burls, what am I to do?"

Mr. Burls opened his mouth once or twice as if to speak; finally he contented himself with shaking his head. He took out the stump of pencil and looked at it, as though seeking an inspiration; shook his head again, and put the pencil back into his pocket.

"Why don't you say something?" demanded Miss Wicks sharply.

"When a party hasn't got any food it stands to reason that that party can't eat," said Mr. Burls. "In other words, that party cannot take nourishment."

"You amaze me!" exclaimed Wicks sarcastically. "If you can't say anything better than that, I'll go home again."

"What I could say and what I'm allowed to say is as different as nails is different from screws," said Burls, with a sigh. "What I might say to a certain party——"

"Is nothing to do with what I'm talking about," broke in Wicks. "I tell you it's all up with us; but for you, we should have been in the streets long ago. But even you can't feed us."

"I could feed *one* of yer," retorted Mr. Burls with meaning.

"Stick to the point," said Wicks, with a deeper colour. "I'm not going to leave them that need me so badly—not if every single blessed man in the world went on his bended knees to me to ask it. I tell you we're done for—and that nice creature you've got for a tenant is the cause of it all."

"Why—'ow's that?" asked the astonished Burls.

Miss Wicks had risen in her excitement and indignation; and it is a curious fact, and one to be recorded, that Mr. Burls put his arm gently about her waist. When I say waist, I mean rather, as Mr. Burls was very tall and Wicks decidedly short, that his long arm passed gently just under her shoulders, and so gave her support. Wicks, in a moment of emotion, flattened one side of her hat brim against his shoulder, and seemed

quite content. Mr. Burls gazed at the opposite wall of the room with a broad smile.

Then Wicks proceeded to tell him in her own characteristic fashion all that she had heard concerning that Mr. Smith who was not Mr. Smith at all; of how he had wormed his way into the family councils; and of how, for no known reason, he had suddenly taken his departure, locking that door he had broken open behind him. More than that, Wicks was convinced that he had dropped those mysterious hints to the tradespeople which had caused that sudden stoppage of credit.

"And so, if you please," Wicks ended, "if we behaved ourselves nicely we was to have fortunes and things like that — be-good-and-you'll-be-happy kind of business. But no; me lord takes offence, and off he goes, and locks his door behind him."

"Wich to break open a door between two sets of premises is trespass," said Mr. Burls thoughtfully. "And trespass is agen the law, if I know anythink. Now, suppose you an' me,"—the arm of Mr. Burls tightened round Miss Wicks,—"on'y suppose you an' me 'appened to be in this very room, an' some other party shoved 'imself against the wall, so to speak, an' came through. Wot should we think?"

"You have a bad habit, Mr. Burls, of

harking back," said Wicks, releasing herself, and setting her hat straight. "'Pon my word," she added, in a dignified fashion, "I can't think how your arm came to be there. Besides, there's someone coming into the shop."

Mr. Burls, having unbent so far, unbent a little further, and lightly struck that offending arm with his other hand; he had seen it done once at a music hall. Miss Wicks laughed, and told him to go along; and he went along as far as the shop, into which, as it happened, Gideon Boatwright had entered a minute before.

Now, curiosity prompted Miss Wicks to see what sort of customer this was who had entered; because there was a distinct prospect that in some distant future she might be interested in any and every customer that came to that shop. Peering past Mr. Burls, she saw Gideon Boatwright standing there, with his hands behind his back, talking; she opened the door leading into the shop, and listened. The upper part of that door was glazed and discreetly screened by a muslin curtain, so that Wicks was able both to see and to hear distinctly.

"What I want to know is," Gideon Boatwright was saying, "when did these people pay you any rent? How much is owing?"

"An' wot I say to you, sir," said Mr. Burls very slowly, "is wot business is that of yours?"

Miss Wicks very softly and silently patted her hands together, in token of appreciation, and beamed upon the broad back of Mr. Burls, who was not perhaps so unconscious of her presence as he seemed to be.

"It's my business in a bigger fashion than you think," said Gideon. "I know these people—I am related to them."

"So I 'ave 'eard, sir," said Mr. Burls, glancing at the ceiling as though the subject did not interest him.

"Oh, you've heard that, have you?" snapped the other. "Everyone seems to have heard it, or to know something about it. And I suppose, like all the rest, you're counting on me—reckoning on me for the payment of another man's debts—eh? If so, you'll find yourself mistaken. I'm your friend——"

"I ain't exactly sure that I'm lookin' for friends to-day," said Mr. Burls, still with his gaze fixed upon the ceiling.

"Nevertheless, I want to help you," said Gideon, a little baffled. "I want you to understand that these people are penniless, and that they have no expectations of ever getting any money from anyone. The man is a beggarly writer, who can't make both ends meet——"

"And you, sir, I take it," said Mr. Burls, bringing his eyes down from the ceiling, and taking a step towards Gideon,—"you, sir, I take it, are a gentleman that's got more money than he quite know' wot to do with, an' nobody in the world to give it to, or leave it to—unless he turns at the last to 'ospitals, or 'omes for the decayed—whether animal or human. So far as you're concerned, sir," went on Mr. Burls, warming with his subject, and feeling inspired perhaps by that unseen presence behind him, "I can on'y say, with all doo respect to you, that I'm ashamed of yer, and I'm sorry that any premises that never was a good investment should be in your 'ands, 'owever paid for. An' that's my larst word!"

Gideon Boatwright had actually opened his lips to speak, when there came a surprising interruption. The door leading into the parlour swung open, and there came out a whirlwind. The whirlwind was Miss Wicks, with her hat very much on one side, and her arms waving; and that whirlwind flung itself, in the first instance, straight at Mr. Burls, with an amazing declaration on her lips—

"Mr. Burls, I am yours!"

Then, disengaging herself from the astonished man, she suddenly faced Gideon Boat-

wright, standing before him with her arms akimbo and her eyes flashing, and with battle in every line of her.

"And as for you!" For a moment words seemed to fail even the resourceful Wicks; she stood literally quivering before him. "If I said what was in me mind, I should say things that before a gentleman like Mr. Burls would not be allowed, and might not be forgiven. But oh!"—she literally shook a fist in the face of Gideon Boatwright—"I should like to know meself for a man for just about five minutes—with the right to use language. Mr. Burls has said what *I* might have said—only putting it a great deal too mild—and all I can add to it is that I hope you'll have the sort of merry Christmas your friends might wish you!"

"I've seen you before," said Gideon sourly, not in the least moved by her words. "I believe you are a servant at Mr. Merrigan's house, aren't you?"

"It's my duty and my pleasure to serve them—as it has been that duty and that pleasure in the past," retorted Wicks, with her head in the air.

"Very pretty—very nice," said Gideon. "As a mere incidental matter—do they pay your wages?"

As a mere incidental matter, they did not;

but Wicks was the last person to acknowledge that. "Long before the day comes round there's my money waiting for me," she answered, with her eyes closed.

"I don't believe you; but you seem to be rather a good-hearted sort of girl," said Gideon. "If you have any respect for yourself, however, and if you hope to do anything with your future, I would advise that you should seek another situation."

"My future, if it comes to that, is settled and arranged for," said Wicks, with a glance at Mr. Burls. "There's one as knows my worth, and acts according."

"'Ear! 'ear!" growled Mr. Burls in response.

"And I suppose, my man, you quite refuse to take my advice and to get rid of these people?" demanded Gideon, after a gloomy pause. "You refuse to see on which side your bread is buttered."

"I've said my last word," said Mr. Burls loftily. "An' I've bin backed up in the sayin' of it in a way that's most surprisin'."

Gideon Boatwright went away fuming at his defeat. Yet, if the truth be told, his greatest rage was against himself, because of the feeling of impotence that was upon him. All that he had meant to do was being done, in a lesser sense, by these people who could

ill afford to do it; all that he had hoped for would be reaped by them, in a smaller sense, in the fulness of time. The gratitude of the people for whom they worked and schemed would be theirs; Gideon Boatwright was shut out in the cold. He hated the thought of that, even as he hated these people for what they were doing.

It is necessary for us to return for a moment to the shop of Mr. Burls; there to see Mr. Burls holding a hand of Wicks, and making sure, in his own business-like way, of the future.

"It was said that w'en I met a certain party I might say certain things to that party —'aving first made up my mind wot those things were to be said. But now it seems to me——"

"That the party has said them for you," she broke in saucily. "By the way, seeing that things are as they are between us, it's rather awkward for me to keep on calling you 'Mr. Burls.' Do they happen to have given you a Christian name at all when you were young?"

"James," said Mr. Burls laconically. "I would only ask that you don't call me 'Jim,' because mother—long since gone to 'eavenly 'ome—didn't like it."

"I wouldn't upset your mother for the

world—whether she's gone or not," Wicks promised. "So James it shall be. You may kiss me, James," she added, proffering a cheek.

"I never thought it 'd come to this; we never know wot's in store for us," said Mr. Burls, wiping his lips with the back of his hand. "I'm not sorry, take it for all in all; I can only 'ope it'll turn out all right for both parties."

"Only mind"—Miss Wicks held up a warning forefinger—"I make no promises as to when I can make what I should call a home for you. It seems to me there's a few things need changing badly—and perhaps a thorough good clean-up by way of a honeymoon wouldn't be at all a bad idea."

"I daresay you know best, my dear," said Mr. Burls.

Meanwhile Gideon Boatwright had gone away, with that unsatisfactory feeling in his mind that he was making rather a poor show of things. It was all very well to take this strong stand, but he would have liked it better had those against whom he took the stand been a little stronger. He was fighting the weakest of the weak, and by reason of his strength was showing up badly in the battle. To be despised by a mere Burls or a Wicks was not at all to his taste.

Moreover, it was difficult for the man to keep down that better side of his nature that had

once been disturbed and stirred so deeply. Strive as he would, he could not call up with any certainty the old stern, dominant man who had beaten all other men to their knees, and had triumphed over them. His life had been changed in a day; and, embittered though he was now, he would have been glad of almost any excuse to enable him to keep that change alive. As he paced through the streets he could not get out of his mind the remembrance of how he had sat in a certain room, before a glowing fire, with the light thin figure of the Scrap resting against his knee, he seemed to see again and again the black bullet head of the Pirate wagging from side to side, while the Pirate emitted one of his favourite howls. It had all been very pleasant and very good; and now doubtless they had all been taught to regard this terrible old man as a monster and to tremble at his name. Which would have been all very right a month or two ago, but was by no means right now.

Nevertheless, the strong will of the man conquered a little at last; he was able to eat a pretty substantial dinner at the hotel, and then to find that a long evening was stretching before him and that the time must be killed somehow. Out in the streets again, he found his feet tending towards Kensington; resolutely turned about, and made for a theatre. But

the play he chose to see was not at all to his liking, and was something to which he was quite unaccustomed; in less than an hour he was out again in the streets. It was a bitter night, and the wind swept round him and rustled his clothes; but he did not mind that. He was thinking only of Quaker's Gardens, and of what might be happening there.

"Why shouldn't I go and look at the place?" he argued to himself. "After all, I've rented the house—and my servant is there; surely I have a perfect right to go and see that all is well, and that he's carrying out my orders. I'll go back."

Satisfying himself that he was doing the thing for the most ordinary and commonplace reasons in the world, Gideon Boatwright hailed a cab, and was driven to the end of Quaker's Gardens. It was now very late, and the bitter wind and a touch of frost in the air had driven most people homewards. More than once he passed some houseless wretch, hugging himself or herself in thin clothing, and looking eagerly to right and to left, as though in search of shelter; once a child drifted by, holding to a woman's skirts. There was a tug at his heart-strings for a moment, as he thought of certain people in Poverty Castle who might come to be homeless on such a night; but after all that did not concern him. He was not going back

on his word; his visit to Quaker's Gardens was a matter that concerned only himself and Lope, and no one else.

He walked down Quaker's Gardens, after dismissing the cab, and saw the two houses standing there, all in darkness. He put his key into the lock of the second house, and went in; discovered that all was quiet; and decided that Lope must have gone to bed. To be perfectly certain about that, however, he struck a match, and lit a candle that stood on a little shelf in the hall; and carrying his stick and wearing his hat, went quietly up the stairs to Lope's room. He thrust open the door without ceremony, and went in, holding the candle above his head. The bed was empty.

He stood staring at the bed for a moment or two, and then went out on to the landing, and looked up the stairs and down the stairs; finally, on an impulse, began to mount. He heard footsteps above him, and a moment or two later saw Lope's head appear over the stair-rail, peering down at him.

"What are you doing up there?" he demanded.

"Nothing, master," faltered the man. "I—I thought I heard a noise; so I went up. Is anything the matter?"

"Nothing," said Gideon. "Come down; I want to talk to you."

Lope dragged himself slowly down the stairs, until he came to where Gideon Boatwright was standing. Gideon, after a long look at him, went into Lope's bedroom, and seated himself on Lope's bed, holding the candle on one knee. The other man stood in characteristic attitude, leaning against the wall, and watching him.

"Well, has anything happened?" he demanded at last.

"Nothing—nothing," replied Lope hurriedly. "What should happen?"

"Why are you wandering about the house at night?" asked Gideon suspiciously.

"I couldn't rest, master; I thought I heard noises."

"What sort of noises, pray?"

"Voices—children's voices," said Lope, in a sort of whisper.

Gideon Boatwright started to his feet, and walked across the room, and set the candlestick down with a bang on the makeshift dressing-table. Then he pointed with his stick to the bed.

"I warned you I wouldn't have you speak of those things," he said sternly. "Now, take off your things, and get to bed. Quick—I want to put the light out."

The man obediently hurried off his clothes, and crept into bed. Gideon blew out the light,

and, standing there in the darkened room, spoke his final words.

"I want no more talk about hearing voices or noises—or any such rubbish as that," he said. "You've got to forget all that. Do you understand?"

"Yes, master, I understand," came a mere whisper from the bed.

"Then don't forget again," said Gideon. "Good-night!"

He went out of the room and out of the house. But he was so far from forgetting himself, that he paced the pavements of Quaker's Gardens—up and down—and up and down, under the trees in the bitter winter air, looking wistfully at Poverty Castle, and thinking perhaps of little heads on little pillows in that starved household.

CHAPTER X

THE VICTUALLING OF THE CASTLE

LOPE, lying awake in the dark and listening to the retreating footsteps of his master, had time to think of what he had done and how nearly he had been caught. For it had been no mere innocent matter of hearing a noise, and searching for the cause in the interests of Gideon Boatwright; Lope had broken all bounds, and had gone into the other house. And the way of it had been this.

After Gideon's departure from the place, on that night when he began his rambles about London, Lope, for his part, had rambled unhappily up and down the house, held in bondage by the threats and commands of his master, and yet longing to be free, in order that he might in some indefinite fashion do something. In the strange business in which he had been concerned something within the creature had been stirred, as it had never been stirred before. In a sense he rejoiced in that

title bestowed upon him of "the Gnome"; it was a distinction—a something that would have been given to no one else. For the first time in his life he touched playful things; and his life had been passed in the shadows always. And now a child had given him that title, and had given it to him for a reason. He could not forget that reason; he was never to forget it.

"I know that all gnomes are good, and help people at night."

That was what she had said; and it was a clear call to Lope, and one that must be answered. But in his blundering fashion he would have been likely to set about it in the wrong way, had not another and a subtler brain been brought to bear upon the business.

That subtler brain belonged to Leopold Potter. As will readily be understood, Mr. Leopold Potter was in the depths of despair; because by his own rash act he had suddenly closed all Quaker's Gardens against him. The great and money-giving Gideon Boatwright was gone, and was never likely to come back again; and for very shame at the remembrance of the disaster he had brought upon Poverty Castle, Leopold Potter dared not raised his hand to its knocker. He had, however, haunted the confines of the place, and had watched the incomings and outgoings of those

in whom he was interested. And so had seen Gideon Boatwright also hovering about the place, and finally going away.

Anxiety to learn what had happened prompted the poet to make his way to Gideon's house, in the hope that he might at least see that strange servant, who had apparently been left behind. So he waited until darkness set in, and then, approaching with caution, knocked at the door. After a long delay, Lope opened it to the length of a chain that held it, and, peering out, demanded to know who was there.

"You can let me in with safety," said Mr. Potter, his face close to the other face. "I am nobody in particular."

"You were turned out by the master," Lope reminded him.

"But the master's not here—and I am perishing of cold and hunger. At least—not exactly of hunger," he qualified, "but I probably shall be within a very short time. I want to speak to you; let me in."

Lope had been alone in that dreary house all day, and was not averse to company. He opened the door, and the poet glided in, and waited in the darkness while the man secured the door again and got a light. They went to a room at the back of the house, where Lope, making a hideous shadow on the wall and

ceiling, and seeming to loom over Leopold Potter, waited to hear what that gentleman's errand was.

So far as the poet was concerned he merely looked upon Lope as someone to be propitiated. "And how are you getting on?" he asked, with a smile.

"As I've always got on," returned the other, looking at him suspiciously. "What do you mean, sir?"

Mr. Potter, in his eagerness, leaned nearer to the Gnome. "I want you to tell me what your master means to do; I want to understand, if possible, what is happening. You see, we've all been so friendly and nice and comfortable, and your good master, Mr. Boatwright, has been so generous," he added, with a sigh, "that I should like to feel that things might get straight again. It's partly my fault, and I believe I've blundered horribly; but if there's anything I can do to make amends——"

"Is there anything any of us can do to make amends?' broke in Lope passionately. "Is there anyone feels it as I do? Is there anyone that has the right to feel it as I do? Since I came to this place I've lived, for the first time—been something better than what I was—touched the sweet things of life. What do you know, or what does anyone else know, of

what such a broken creature as I is capable of feeling?"

"I've never heard you talk before," said Potter, looking at him wonderingly,—"you speak like a gentleman."

The Gnome shrugged his shoulders, and spread out his hands, and glanced down at himself. "Perhaps—perhaps not,' he said. "All that lies back, hidden among the years that are dead. I am now and shall be always just what you see me—a broken, twisted creature, with no history, and only the name that is an absurdity. But leave me alone; let us come to something else."

"The something else is the people next door," blurted out the poet. "I want to know exactly what I've done; I want to understand what has happened to them."

So Lope told him: of the locking of that door, and of the throwing away of the key; of the strict injunction that had been laid upon himself that he was to have nothing to do with the people. About the finding of that key he said nothing then.

"But they'll starve; they'll be left destitute," urged the poet. "I know the condition they're in; I know what is bound to happen."

"And I know it too," said Lope. "And I am here, within touch and sound of them—and I'm helpless."

"But this place is in your own hands; you can do as you like while your master's away," urged the poet, feeling his way with difficulty. "Surely some way might be found to help them. If we could get into that other house!"

For Mr. Leopold Potter, in his own selfish fashion, had a game to play. He felt certain that Gideon Boatwright was done with him; in his own mind he was sure of it. But there had been a good haven for him always at Poverty Castle, and he wanted much to get back to that haven. For this was the winter; and this poor poet knew that, he must feel the pinch of it, before any possible spring could come to warm his blood. He wanted to make peace with Chadwick Merrigan and Mary; he wanted to sit by the warm fires, and sniff the scent of roasted meats.

"We can get into the other house," said Lope slowly, after a pause. "But what good would there be in that?"

"How can we get into the other house? What do you mean?" asked Mr. Potter, with some excitement.

"I mean that I have the key to that door," answered the other.

"But he threw it away?"

Lope nodded, and almost seemed for a

moment to smile. "It took me an hour or two, hunting about in the cold and the wet," he said, "but I found it." And in proof of it he drew the key from his pocket, and looked at it as it lay in the palm of his hand.

Leopold Potter looked at it too, as though it were not merely the key of an ordinary door, but the key to greater things of which he was vaguely dreaming. He touched it respectfully with a thin forefinger, and glanced up at Lope.

"Then if you found this, you had made up your mind to something else—something you were going to do with it?" he suggested.

"No—not exactly," replied Lope. "I was afraid. *You* have nothing to fear from him—Gideon Boatwright, I mean; I have everything to fear. So though I hold the key, it is of no value to me, or to anyone else."

"But it must be—it shall!" exclaimed the poet, intent upon that scheme of his. "Let us look at the thing from the most practical standpoint. Here are you, free to do as you like—with the dreaded Boatwright away; there are they in the next house—and the Lord only knows what's happening to them. Unlock the door——"

"And then?" Lope looked at him with a startled face.

"Then—carry things through—at night.

Be the good genius of the family; help them while they don't know it; no one will ever know—no one will ever guess."

"I never thought of that," said the other slowly. "And yet the child said that; the child said that all gnomes were good, and helped people at night. That's the idea; I'll do it!"

"Of course you will—because you're a fine fellow, and you really mean to do well for these people," the poet urged. "Begin at once—to-night!"

So it happened that the two men descended to the larder, and got from it all the food that was there, and crept up to that door that was never to have been opened again. It was opened now, and while the poet kept guard and listened, Lope went through into Poverty Castle, with the determination to provision it in that strange way. He had taken off his shoes, and he went about his errand without being discovered. It was only at the last, when he came back from his descent into the lower regions of Poverty Castle, that a great temptation seized him—to see that child for whose sake he was really risking so much.

He limped into the room noiselessly, and stood beside the bed of the Scrap. The moonlight filtered in through the partially

curtained window, and showed him dimly the child lying there; he stood looking at her for a long time. It seemed almost as though there was a spell upon the man; as though, looking there at the pure face of the child, with the fair hair falling about it, he looked back through the years to some dream of what he had been, or of what he had lost. He stood with his head bowed, and his hands clasped before him—a lost creature, in the sense that he had no name, and no story that anyone had ever heard—and no hope, and no future; yet with the certainty upon him that he could never quite be again the dull, listless thing he had been. He came away at last—even stopping to look back from the door at the child; and so passed out, and climbed the stairs to where the poet was waiting.

The poet was in a state of wild excitement. He had heard the sound of moving feet below; he was certain of it. In his frightened mind there could be but one interpretation of that sound: Gideon Boatwright had returned to the house.

Lope locked the door quietly and put the key in his pocket; then the two incongruous heads were bent together, while the two men listened.

"What should have brought him back here?" whispered Lope.

"He'll kill me!—I'm absolutely certain he'll kill me!" breathed the poet. "He's coming up now!"

They heard him stop at the door of Lope's room, and go in; then heard him come out again. There was nothing for it but that Lope must go down and face him, while the trembling Leopold Potter waited above. So, as we know, Lope went down, and at his master's command undressed and went to bed.

Fortunately for Mr. Potter, Gideon did not further explore the house; and, after he had gone away from it the poet remained for quite a long time, shivering in the darkness and cold of that upper landing, and wondering when he should be able to escape. At last, with his teeth chattering and his heart beating violently, he crept downstairs.

Lope met him; and incidentally almost sent the frightened poet into hysterics, by appearing like a sheeted ghost on the stairs, with part of the bedclothes wrapped about him for warmth.

"I dared not move before," said Lope, huddling the bedclothes about him,—"I was afraid he might come back. Only I'm reckless to-night; if anything happens at all it'll happen to me, and I don't care. I suppose you're going now?" he added.

The poet coughed. "Well, as a matter of fact, my poor temporary lodging is quite at the other end of London," he said. "Perhaps you might be able to let me sleep here?"

"It's risky," replied Lope, "but you're welcome enough, so far as I'm concerned. There's an old couch in the dining-room, and I can let you have some rugs."

So for the remainder of that night the poet slept in the house of Gideon Boatwright; and after being warmed with food and hot coffee in the morning, went on his way rejoicing. For in his own mind he had formed a plan presently to break the seal of secrecy which was upon him, and to tell Chadwick Merrigan the real history of how he—Leopold Potter—had been instrumental in saving Poverty Castle, at a time when starvation threatened its inmates.

Meanwhile, one has to think of Wicks. Wicks, like a more youthful Mother Hubbard, knew perfectly well that her cupboard was bare; she had gone to bed with the recollection of that strongly in her mind. In her dreams she had seen the family—looming large and very hungry—demanding impossible things of her on the morrow, and, failing to be satisfied, wreaking vengeance upon her. Not that she cared about that latter part very

much; it was merely the fact that the family she had mothered in her own starved heart was about to suffer and that she was powerless to prevent those sufferings. In her dreams, too, and in the waking moments of a miserable night, she seemed to remember what had happened on the previous day.

In the first place, Mr. Burls had flung discretion to the winds, and after that early interview with Wicks, in which Gideon Boatwright had so inopportunely thrust himself, had actually made an excuse to go to Poverty Castle. It was a bad time of the year, Mr. Burls had observed, for pipes; and Mr. Burls had thought it would not be time wasted if he inspected those at this particular house. The pipes to which he desired to devote attention being in the basement, it was absolutely necessary, of course, that Wicks should accompany him; for her better support, he performed that ceremony of placing his arm just below her shoulders.

In that attitude Mr. Burls may be said to have inspected the pipes from a distance—standing much as though, with Miss Wicks, he faced a photographer. The better to deceive even herself with the belief that Mr. Burls was anxious about the pipes, Miss Wicks presently discreetly withdrew, leaving him alone with them. Mr. Burls spread out

a bag of tools, and turned over its contents; after a little time got up and left the house.

That had been quite late in the day, and not long before Wicks, in the ordinary course of things, locked up the house and retired to rest. In the morning, waking long before the dawn, with all her troubles coming fully upon her, she dressed, and went downstairs, vaguely wondering what she should do to satisfy healthy appetites during the day. And so came to the larder.

Her going to the larder at all was a mere matter of habit; she knew beforehand that there was nothing there. A small matter of bread and butter and tea might be conjured up for breakfast; beyond that there was nothing. Carrying a candle, for the day had not yet fully broken, she opened the larder door and looked listlessly in. And then sat down on an empty box, with her eyes very round, and her mouth wide open, and stared at the shelves.

Something had happened in the night. Here was a ham that had certainly not been there yesterday; there a substantial joint; again, a pie of large proportions. There were incidental things, too, in the shape of luxuries; and they had all come in the most mysterious fashion since last she had stood

in that place. Miss Wicks sat there, with the candle on her knee, staring at them.

There was a possibility, of course, that she might be dreaming; she resorted to a time-honoured custom, and pinched herself to be certain that that was not the case. And then she sat and thought, in her own practical way, of what might have happened.

Love—pointing with a sure hand—indicated Mr. Burls. If the family starved, Wicks must starve; Mr. Burls had recognised that, and the matter of the pipes had been but a hollow pretence. Had not Mr. Burls carried a bulky bag, which ostensibly contained tools—and had he not refrained from opening that bag in the presence of his adored Wicks? She sat there now, smiling to herself, and feeling that Mr. Burls was in every sense of the word a man among men.

Mary Merrigan rose that morning with quakings. Both she and Chadwick had long resorted to that easiest of all devices, refusing to think about disagreeables that might happen. Somehow or other, in that scrambling, happy-go-lucky life they had lived, something had always happened; why should it not happen again? Chadwick Merrigan, indeed, had taken that easiest course of all—that of shutting himself up in his study, and refusing to be disturbed, no matter what happened.

Each knew perfectly well the exact state of affairs; for had not Wicks explained everything to them, and urged with tears in her eyes that something must be done? But then, again, Wicks had urged that times without number; and somehow it had come down in the end to Chadwick Merrigan, smiling at his wife and saying that he supposed Wicks would manage somehow.

Obviously, therefore, there was nothing surprising about Wicks having managed on this occasion. There was to have been no breakfast, according to the alarmist report of Wicks; and here was breakfast in plenty. Obviously, as on former occasions, Wicks had been overfrightened.

Naturally the girl said nothing about that extraordinary windfall; for anything connected with Mr. Burls belonged only to her secret heart. What she would say to Mr. Burls when she met him was quite another matter; she blamed herself for not having been more demonstrative towards him in the past.

Mr. Chadwick Merrigan attacked his ham with a great appetite, and forbore to ask questions. He talked on every possible cheerful subject he could think of, avoiding always that one by no means cheerful subject which faced him at all times. And, know-

ing what she thought she knew, even the usually grim and taciturn Wicks unbent a little, and bustled about her duties almost smilingly.

Wicks made two or three efforts in the course of that day to see Mr. Burls; she had carefully rehearsed her little scene with him, in which, beginning with coldness, she melted to tenderness, until finally she saw herself, quite modestly and with the strictest propriety, in his arms—Mr. Burls bending over her with a rapturous look of admiration in his eyes. It was the more disappointing, therefore, that she failed on each occasion to find Burls at the shop. But his absence more than ever confirmed her suspicions; she was convinced that he was keeping out of her way.

As the day wore on a great plan came into her mind for meeting him in the most unexpected way—in a way, in fact, which would have something of romance about it. She had been puzzled at first to understand how she could get speech of him, while apparently he was avoiding her; she determined that she would keep watch in the future, in the hope to waylay him in the very act of provisioning the house; for nothing would shake her belief that Burls was the man.

Accordingly when that night, after lying

awake a long time, she thought she heard footsteps in the house, she smiled to herself, and got up, and went quietly downstairs. If she thought about the matter at all, she felt convinced that Mr. Burls, as the landlord of the place, would in all probability possess a key for such an emergency as this; but perhaps she did not think of minor details. She had prepared herself carefully for the occasion, and while her appearance might not have been attractive to anyone of a cultured taste, it was sufficiently remarkable to excite notice.

Her hair was arranged neatly in what are usually known as "curlers," and over her head she had thrown a light antimacassar, which did not wholly hide the "curlers" in question. A dark red petticoat concealed the lines of her figure, the upper part of which was encased in a very tightly fitting short jacket, which once had boasted fur upon the cuffs and collar. Time and moths had, however, done their deadly work, and there was but little of the fur left, nor was it possible to say, even on the closest inspection, from the body of what animal it had originally been rifled.

Stepping delicately, Miss Wicks walked down, rehearsing to herself the first shock of surprise with which she would greet Mr.

Burls, and seeing also in his eyes a new admiration for her charms. She gained the basement, and listened intently; someone was evidently moving about in the larder (which was a particularly large one, although it usually contained so little). What was more remarkable still, it seemed as though she heard the sound of whispering voices.

She went forward to the door, and laid her ear against it, and listened. She could hear nothing distinctly, and she came to the rapid conclusion that Mr. Burls was either talking or singing to himself in a low tone. Drawing herself up, and looking as haughtily indignant as she could at such short notice, she suddenly opened the door and stepped into the larder. And to her intense astonishment heard the door slam behind her, and the key turn in the lock.

Now what had happened was this. A little time before, the Pirate had, in the most unaccountable fashion, found himself sitting up in bed—half awake—and, as on a former occasion, with the feeling that someone was moving near him. After sitting there in the darkness for a moment or two, he scrambled out of bed and sought Fatima. But he might as well have tried to thump any sense into the bedstead itself as into that sleepy youth; and, after several whispered expostulations and en-

treaties, the Pirate gave it up, and sought that more trusted ally—the Scrap.

The Scrap was awake in a moment. She sat up in bed and listened, while the Pirate whispered that he was quite certain someone had come down from the direction of the Magic Door, and that that someone was in the house at that very moment. Was the Scrap prepared to go out, and if necessary assist the Pirate to sell his life dearly, if by chance these should be enemies instead of friends?

The Scrap was eager for the shedding of anybody's blood—even though it should be her own—in the true and proper search for adventure. So she scrambled out of bed, and together they made for the door; only to stand still there, just inside it, listening. For there were other steps outside on the stairs.

They peered out, and looked over the head of the stairs, and saw the figure of a man going very cautiously down. They were just about to descend, tremblingly enough, in the wake of the unknown, when they heard another sound above them; and were only just in time to scamper back into the room they had left, and softly close the door, before someone else passed down the stairs in the same direction as the first. It was too dark to see anything

clearly, even when they looked out; but the Pirate nudged the Scrap and whispered—

"There's three of 'em, at least!" he said. "You're not afraid, by any chance?"

"I am not," said the Scrap calmly; but her teeth chattered. "If the worst comes to the worst, I've got a scream that makes the tiles rattle,—at least the Old Man says so,—and *you* can run between their legs and trip 'em up."

Thus it happened that the Pirate and the Scrap stole down the stairs, clinging to each other, and inwardly wondering, though neither would have confessed it, whether they would ever get back to comfortable beds again alive and well. Of course they could not know that the first person that had stolen down the stairs was the Gnome, laden with good things; nor could they know that the second had been no other than Leopold Potter the poet.

For it happened that Mr. Leopold Potter, left at that parting of the ways between the two houses, had found himself quite unable to bear the strain of waiting there alone. On the previous night he had been almost discovered by Gideon Boatwright; he shook in his shoes now, on this second night, fearing lest he should hear once again the heavy tread of the old man upon the stairs.

This had been a day of plotting indeed; and

Lope, fired by the imagination of the poet, had been urged to greater lengths even than before. For on this occasion they had not merely contented themselves with taking the things that were in Gideon Boatwright's house; Lope, on the strength of his master's credit, had flung his orders broadcast; there should be enough for Christmas, and to spare. So that things cooked and uncooked were being hurried this night into Poverty Castle under cover of the darkness.

All might have been well had Leopold Potter been content to remain sentinel at his post. But, his fears overcoming him, he at last went down, perhaps in the hope to hurry the other man at his task, so that they might both get back into safety. Thus it happened that the poet was the second figure, and was quite unconscious that he, in his turn, was being followed by Miss Wicks.

So, for that matter, was Miss Wicks unconscious that she was being followed by the Pirate in his pyjamas and the Scrap in her nightgown. As we have seen, Miss Wicks, with her mind full of Mrs Burls and nothing else, came to the door of the larder, and opened it, and went in. And that was the chance that the Pirate and the Scrap had been hoping for.

They did not know who their prisoners

were; they simply knew that here was the opportunity to lock them all in together. It was the Scrap who clapped to the door; it was the Pirate that turned the key.

Miss Wicks, of course, suddenly found herself locked in, in the dead of night, with a man she knew as the servant of Gideon Boatwright and with Mr. Leopold Potter. She, who had expected to be caught to the embrace of a Burls, suddenly stood face to face with two men who appeared to be equally astonished at seeing her. The Gnome had evidently been engaged in unpacking a large basket, with the slight assistance of Mr. Potter; both the men knelt beside it now, and looked up at the astonished woman. For a moment they even forgot that sudden closing and locking of the door.

"Gracious!" ejaculated Miss Wicks in a whisper. "I declare I never expected to find—— May I ask what you two are precisely up to?"

The poet was the first to recover. "'Ssh!" he whispered, with a finger on his lips. "You must know, woman, that we are bent on a deed of charity."

"Lor'!" exclaimed Miss Wicks, in a disappointed tone. "And me thinking it was somebody else! Seems to be a bit of a liberty you're taking," she added, glancing at the

shelves and at the basket at her feet. "Whose idea might this be?"

"Mine, in the first instance," said Mr. Potter impressively. "I persuaded this good fellow to lend himself to the scheme, but the real beginnings of it were with me. Out of the plenty of another man we feed the hungry and the deserving; we step in at a critical moment——"

"I give you my word you do!" exclaimed Miss Wicks, in a low voice. Then, suddenly remembering that closing of the door, which in her excitement and surprise she had forgotten, and which until this moment she had probably attributed to a mere accidental closing of it, she turned quickly and twisted the handle.

"Locked in, if you please!" she whispered, with a scared face.

Lope shambled to the door and turned the handle sharply; looked back at the poet. "It's a trap," he said,—"someone has suspected, and has caught us. What's going to happen now?"

Mr. Leopold Potter sat down on the basket and buried his face in his hands. "Ruined!" he wailed, in a sort of ghostly whisper,—"done for! He's come again, as I knew he would; he's followed us here. Caught in the act, friend Lope,—the Lord only knows what he'll do with us now!"

"Well, they're not going to keep me here, at any rate, not if there's twenty thousand of 'em and them all policemen!" exclaimed Miss Wicks. And forthwith she began to rattle the door handle fiercely.

Now it has to be recorded that the Pirate and the Scrap, having made this great capture, did not quite know what to do with it. It is all very well to clap three unknown people behind a locked door, but you cannot leave them there indefinitely. Moreover, there is the glory of the capture to be considered, and that glory is but a tame business unless shared by others.

So that the Pirate and the Scrap had first of all raced upstairs, and had literally dragged the more somnolent Angel and Fatima out of their beds, and had imparted the news to them while they were actually dragging them down the stairs. The news did not take long in the telling, being told breathlessly and in few words. There were three ruffians in the place—or it might be seven—or the Scrap was not quite certain that she hadn't counted ten, as they filed past with knives between their teeth. And they were all locked in the larder!

The Angel, something to the disgust of the Pirate and the Scrap, counselled the assistance of the elders; and in that was supported by

Fatima. Accordingly there was an invasion of that room occupied by the Old Man and Mary; both of whom tumbled out of bed on different sides at the startling news imparted to them. It was necessary, of course, that questions should be whispered, and breathlessly answered; equally necessary that the Old Man should possess himself of some weapon with which to cope with the intruders. In a mighty scurry, while Mary Merrigan got on a dressing-gown, the Old Man secured a great cavalry sword that had once been picked up by him, a great bargain, at a sale, and armed with that, marched at the head of the little procession on the doomed occupants of the larder. And by that time Miss Wicks was shaking the handle fiercely, and demanding, not without threats, to be released.

Her voice was clear enough and loud enough to be heard by them all; Chadwick Merrigan lowered his cavalry sword, and stared in dismay at Mary and at the others.

"Why, it's Wicks," he whispered. "In the name of all that's wonderful, why have you locked her in the larder?"

"Don't you believe it," replied the Pirate stoutly. "It's somebody else, pretending to be Wicks. Anybody could see through that."

"Besides, there's lots of other people in

there," the Scrap assured him. "They're packed tight—simply standing on each other's toes. The best thing to do is for someone to unlock the door, and for you to stick your sword through 'em, Old Man, as they come out."

"I believe that's what's generally done," said the Pirate, smacking his lips.

But by this time the voice of Wicks was not only insistent but plaintive. Obviously there was nothing to be feared from her, and Chadwick advanced to the door, and unlocked it, and threw it open. Wicks, in her strange array, stood there confessed; and behind her, sheepishly enough, Mr. Leopold Potter and Lope.

"Why, Wicks, what on earth are you doing in there?" demanded Mrs. Merrigan.

Miss Wicks gave a touch to the anti-macassar which draped her head, and answered, "Well, ma'am, I suppose if one hears noises in what you might call the dead of the night, it's only proper that one should get up and see what's happening for goodness' sake. Not wishing that the family should be butchered in its beds, down I come; with the result, if you please, that locked in I am, with two intruders and nothing else, though I says it to their faces, by someone that seems fond of what I suppose they call a joke."

"Permit me, my dear Merrigan, to explain," said the poet, stepping forward. "This is a little innocent device on our part—a little spoiling of the Egyptians, as it were, for the sake of those to whom we are well disposed. The good Lope and myself made up our minds that we would, in a sense, provision you—feed you out of the bounty of a man who really has no bounty in him. I can explain in five minutes——"

Chadwick Merrigan raised his hand. "Be quiet!" he said. "It seems we have another visitor—though where he comes from I don't know."

"He's come through the door that we left open," said Lope, with a hopeless gesture.

It was true enough. While they stood listening they heard the heavy tread on the stairs above them; for now Gideon Boatwright was at no pains to muffle his steps. He came on down the stairs steadily, and so, guided by the light, arrived in the basement, and saw that curious group huddled there, watching him. Chadwick Merrigan was about to step forward, forgetful of the formidable weapon he carried, when Lope thrust his way past him, and stood between Gideon Boatwright and the others.

"Master," he said quickly, "the fault is mine. I opened the door—I brought Mr. Potter with me."

For a moment or two, in the dead silence which followed, Gideon Boatwright stood still, looking at them. In his old masterful way he knew that he dominated the situation, and in spite of himself he rather enjoyed the feeling. He was muffled in a thick overcoat, and he kept his hat on; his hands were thrust deep in his pockets.

"I warned you, Lope, that you should not have anything to do with these people; I told you that that door was never to be opened again; you have disobeyed my orders. As for you, poor fool,"—he glared at the poet, who was peering round the edge of the larder door,—"you're made of the stuff that wrecks men's lives by feeble blundering. I've nothing to say to you. All I want to know is the purpose that brought you both here. Answer me, Lope." He struck his stick savagely on the ground as he spoke.

"I had heard that all was not well with the people here," began Lope in a low voice, and with a deprecatory glance at Chadwick Merrigan. "I found the key of that door—and it was easy to slip through, and to bring—to bring things with me."

"But what did you bring?" exclaimed Chadwick Merrigan quickly.

"Which I might have expected it this morning, when I found the place stuffed full

with hams and pies and what not that had come unbeknownst in the night!" exclaimed Wicks, clasping her hands.

"You see," Boatwright sneered, "this man felt that you might be in want of food. So he stole from me, and disobeyed my orders, and brought things here to feed you and—and those belonging to you. A pretty game, and one that I've no doubt you were glad enough to encourage."

"If you dare to suggest such a thing as that, sir——" began Chadwick Merrigan, quite unconsciously raising his sword. But the old man checked him with a gesture.

"Whether you knew of it, or whether you did not, matters little to me. I'll put an end to this business once and for all. Lope, come with me. I leave you your poet," he added to Chadwick Merrigan, with a grim laugh; "I want nothing to do with him."

"Stop a moment," said Chadwick. "Let your man take back the things he brought here to-night; I want never to see you or him again. Put them together, and take them back with you!"

"Do as he tells you," said Gideon Boatwright, after a pause. "We must respect proper pride, you know."

Mary Merrigan had hurried off with the children to their rooms; in a grim silence the

things were packed into the basket. Only be it mentioned that Lope was careful to pack only those he had brought that night, and indeed not quite all of those; and Wicks closed her eyes and held her peace. Then Lope went before up the stairs, carrying the basket, and the old man followed. He said never a word until they had passed through that door and he had locked it. He followed Lope down through the house, until they came to a room where he bade the man set down his burden.

"You've served me a good many years now, Lope," began the old man, a little wearily, "and to-night sees the end of that service. You are not to be trusted; and so I have done with you. If you have anything that belongs to you here, put it together, and go. I will give you money, so that you shall not starve for a day or two; but I never want to see your face again."

"I don't want money—and there is nothing here that belongs to me," said the man, in a low voice.

"Then you can go the quicker," said Gideon Boatwright.

The man got his hat, and without a glance at that other man he had served for so many years, went out of the house, and into the winter night, and was lost in the darkness.

Soon afterwards Gideon Boatwright extinguished the lights, and closed the outer door, and followed him. And in his heart he told himself bitterly that this was the end, and that Quaker's Gardens should see him no more.

CHAPTER XI

"SQUAWKY SAL"

MR. GIDEON BOATWRIGHT, obstinate man that he was, had been unfortunate in two different instances, in having been forestalled by someone else in certain schemes that had originated in his own mind. In the first place, that unlucky poet Leopold Potter had sprung a mine under him, in declaring to Chadwick Merrigan and his wife exactly who this unknown stranger really was; and in the second place, Lope had blunderingly done what Gideon Boatwright would probably have been very glad to do himself.

For it must not be imagined for a moment that the man was essentially hard-hearted. On the contrary, the mere fact that he had been baffled on two different occasions in the carrying out of his schemes only really made him more anxious to do something that should prove he was not so bad as people had in all probability painted him.

He had not wandered the streets of London at that season of the year for nothing; always he pictured himself arriving, in the very nick of time, to save these people; and so standing for ever afterwards on a certain sort of pinnacle in their remembrance of him. It is safe to say that it was with some such thought in his mind that he had come back to Quaker's Gardens on that night which saw the poet and Lope make their way into Poverty Castle.

But his rage may be imagined when, after walking calmly through the house, he climbed, full of suspicion, to that upper floor from which the door opened into the adjoining house; and discovered that door to be open. Whatever he might have been disposed to do himself was not a matter for someone else to undertake; and his fury had increased rather than abated as he strode through that open door and went down to confront those who, to put it literally, had had the audacity to teach him his business. He had come back to the house relenting; he went away hardened.

He went back to his hotel, blaming himself bitterly for past weaknesses. Once more he appeared simply and solely as the man of wealth, to be preyed upon by all and sundry; once more he saw that these people had

determined to suck from him and from his substance what they could—to cheat him of his money. He had been a fool from the beginning, and the proof of it lay in the fact that even Lope, that faithful subdued servant of many years, had plotted against him, and would have plotted against him again, if he had the chance.

So, grimly enough, he had ended the matter; for the future there was no Lope, and there was no one at all in all his world, save himself. A few months ago Gideon Boatwright had not existed, so far as these people were concerned; and it should be now as though he had never existed at all. He would go back to that other land across the sea, and would live as he had lived for so long—a mere solitary human being, making money, and controlling men by the power his money gave him.

All of which was very easy in the saying, but not so easy in the doing. For it is written in the great book of life that a man may not cut out of himself his memories, nor that thing that men, for the want of a better name, designate Conscience. And so it happened that, go where he would, a little trail of shadowy ghosts came after him, and they pattered with light feet even through the noisy streets of London, and even into

the dreary rooms of the hotel in which he had taken up his abode. More than all else, they haunted him with the very spirit of this Christmas-time into which, in a mistaken moment, he had thrust himself and his affairs; and they would not be denied. No matter with what sophistry he answered the demands of those memories within him, he could not silence them.

"You are a lonely old man—soon to die, and to be buried away in the earth and forgotten. Good, then, if it were possible, that you might be remembered by a little child—better still that you might be spoken of softly, in some gathering about the fire on a winter night, and remembered with tenderness!"

To that he made prompt answer. "I want no tenderness; I want justice."

"If justice were meted out to you, with the wrecked lives of men lying behind you in the long procession of the years—where would you stand to-night?"

He was ready again there; he answered in the old strong, dominant way. "I did to men what they would have done to me, if I had not been the stronger. I justify myself by the results."

"And what are the results? A handful of coins—a sordid matter of gold, that will

be snatched at, and scrambled for, and quarrelled over, when you are dust!"

He strove, but strove in vain, to get back to what he had been; to win back in some fashion to the hard old man who had stood on the deck of a ship, and had watched that England to which he was returning, bent upon vengeance. But something had snapped in the man, and he could not join together the frayed ends of it. He was not what he had been; despite himself, there had grown up in him a desperate longing for some love and some sympathy—for the touch of hands his hands had never known—for the sound of voices other than the voices of bargaining men. He stood alone in a world that knew nothing of him, and cared nothing for him; and he had alienated himself from those who had stretched out hands of welcome to him. So much at least he recognised, although he fiercely refused to admit it to himself.

And Lope? Lope, who had been his faithful servant—his humble, dog-like follower through many years; the creature who had cooked his food and waited upon him; the man of whose story he guessed something, but knew nothing in reality; what of Lope? To this had his vengeance come: that he had cast Lope adrift, penniless and broken and old, with no hope for the future. Lope

had been cast by the wayside—left behind in the race of life; he must lie there, and starve. And Lope had been his faithful friend and servant.

"He has waited upon you hand and foot for many years; he has taken your blows and your curses; where is he to-night?" So said that voice that would not be stilled.

"I picked him out of the gutter; I have fed and clothed and lodged him for many years," Gideon Boatwright made answer.

"He had the courage to defy you; out of a heart you had tried to crush the man was able to discover a way to help those you wanted to help yourself." (Would the voice never be still!)

"I meant to do what he did myself; in time I would have relented, and would have gone back and helped them. I meant that from the first," he answered fiercely.

Never!" came the voice, like the wailing of the wind. "You know yourself, Gideon Boatwright; you know that you would never have done it!"

So, pursued and haunted, the man walked the streets of London, cut off, as it seemed, from all men, and wondering always what he should do. For he was in this case: that his vengeance was dead, and yet at the same time any reparation he might once have meant to

make was dead too. He had failed alike in that first scheme and in the last; he stood a futile thing, impotent and raging and lonely.

He went back to his hotel and dined; and then saw, stretching before him, a long evening during which he must do something to crush down those memories and those voices that would not be stilled. He must get at grips with himself somehow or other; must begin that process of calling up the ghost of the old Gideon Boatwright that he had tried once to lay. Restlessly he came out into the streets again, and found himself jostled by crowds of people—high and low, and rich and poor—staring at shop windows, or hurrying home to comfortable firesides; and everywhere was breathed about him, as though belonging to the very air itself, that strange spirit of Christmas.

Scarcely knowing where he walked, or in what direction his restless feet turned, he came to a place of flaring lights; it was a music hall. He stopped to look at the placards outside it, and at photographs and caricatures in frames; scarcely knowing what he did, found himself inside the vestibule of the place, with an eye to the prices of seats. For here was distraction, at least; he might fill in an hour or two, before going home to bed and to sleep.

For such a distraction, however, no great

price must be paid: Gideon Boatwright did not approve of such things. Not quite the gallery, perhaps, but a priced seat a little superior to it; Gideon put down his money grudgingly, and clutched the ticket, and went in. Jostled along among a crowd of people, mostly young, he got to a seat, and sat down, with his hands resting on the top of his stick, and his bearded chin resting on his hands. And so waited, to see what these people had to show him for his money.

An uninteresting turn caused him to look away from the stage, and to glance superciliously enough at his neighbours. There were various young men and women seated near to him, and all of them seemed to be enjoying the entertainment in varying degrees. Suddenly, as he looked about, he saw before him the head and shoulders of a man seated next to a young woman; on the other side of the young woman was the round black head of a boy. Mr Gideon Boatwright sat up, and looked at them more attentively; then he gave a gasp. And from that moment his eyes deserted the stage altogether, and he looked only at that little group of three.

The group consisted of Mr. Burls, Mr. Wicks, and the Pirate. They were seated together a few rows before him—Mr. Burls being on the left, and the Pirate on the right

and Wicks, thus closely guarded, between them. Gideon Boatwright blamed himself for having come there, and sincerely hoped that they might not see him; for the rest, he waited and watched, and wondered what had brought the trio there.

The explanation, could he have known, was simple enough. Mr. Burls was blossoming out; life was beginning to present new aspects to him, and he was beginning, on his part, to warm both hands at its fires. In the most casual way he had dropped, in a manner of speaking, into the area of Poverty Castle, and had pulled at his black beard, and had hesitatingly suggested that Miss Wicks might like to go out that evening; while Miss Wicks, for her part, having declared with much emphasis that she was simply sick to death of everything (which seemed ungratefully to include Mr. Burls himself) had failed to see why she shouldn't enjoy herself, for once at least in the course of a miserable existence. Whereupon Mr. Burls had suggested that she should leave it to him; and Wicks had retorted that she hoped she knew herself better than to do anything of the kind. There were places and there were places, had been Wicks' expression.

Mr. Burls, seated in a careless attitude upon a corner of the kitchen table, had suggested a music hall; and it then appeared that Miss

Wicks knew music halls backwards. She had been to them thousands of times; there was nothing they dared show her, at any one of them, that she couldn't pick to pieces in something less than five minutes. In fact, there were many beings that she had heard drew huge salaries that she really wondered had the face to appear at all.

"I wasn't suggestin' anythin' ordinary," said Mr. Burls, a little aggrieved. "If by any chance I should ask a party I was interested in to' so far lower theirselves as to take my arm and walk into my place at say 'alf a dollar a 'ead, I should call it——"

"Waste of money," retorted Miss Wicks sharply. "Not but what," she conceded with a smile, "the dearer seats may be a bit softer; but generally speaking I've found that a shilling is quite enough to throw away on such things. And I wish I had the shillings that I've simply spent, careless like, over and over again."

"I sepose it's 'appened that someone's bin lucky enough to plank down 'is bob alongside of yours?" Mr. Burls suggested, with a white countenance.

Wicks sniffed. "I should like to so much as have caught him at it!" she replied. "I've always gone in alone, and I've held myself aloof."

Mr. Burls breathed again; for there was

always at the back of his mind the dreadful thought that he might yet lose this pearl beyond price that had been blown by the kindly winds of Providence into his shop. He settled down to discuss the matter with Wicks, and to persuade her, if possible, that on one rare occasion she might so far unbend as to allow a wholly unworthy person to walk beside her, and to put down the money which should gain for her admittance to some dazzling place of delight; and for a long time Miss Wicks "didn't see that it was at all necessary."

"If you come to that, I don't think there's anything in London you could show me that would surprise me the leastest mite," she said loftily.

"I don't say as I'm askin' to serprise you," said Mr. Burls humbly, "and I don't suppose it could be done, even at the price of 'alf a dollar. All I'm askin' for is yer company"

"Of course, if you put it that way," said Miss Wicks, relenting a little, "I'm not sure that I mightn't think over it. I wouldn't have you think for the world," she added, "that there's anything obstinate about me; show me a good reason, and you'll find you can move me in a minute."

"The reason I should show," said Mr. Burls, "is the simple reason of enjoyment."

"That's your point of view," said Wicks.

"My point of view is that I should be doing it—going out of my way, in a manner of speaking—to give pleasure to one I esteem—which is you."

"I don't care 'ow you put it," said Mr. Burls tartly, "so long as you make up your mind quick."

Miss Wicks thereupon declared that she had only been joking, with the desire to test him; and there ensued a little friendly scuffle round the kitchen table, the evidence of which was presently to be observed in flecks of flour upon Mr. Burls' good-humoured countenance and in his whiskers. Just as he felt, however, that victory was with him, Miss Wicks raised a hand, and with it an objection.

"As things stand between us, James," she said, "I couldn't quite think of going with you alone."

"Would you like to bring your mother?" asked Mr. Burls gloomily.

"You've no call to drag mother's name in," retorted Wicks, "especially as she's been at rest these many years—and better for her, I say, because I don't think for a moment she'd ever have cottoned to you; fair men was more her mark. What I wanted to say was that I should like to bring somebody with me—sort of pupil of mine, if I may say so—as would appreciate it."

"I can't quite say I understand," said Mr. Burls.

"I'm not asking you to stretch your mind too much," Miss Wicks assured him. "But there's someone I should like to take—and someone you would like to take, James Burls, if you have any idea of doing a kindness. I mean Miss Christina—the one you've heard called 'the Scrap.' There's some of 'em I've seen at the halls as 'd be fit to hang their heads and go out by the back way if they could see her. She's never been to a place of that sort—and you'd be pleasing *me*, Mr. Burls, if you could spread yourself to the extent of another half-crown—always supposing, of course, that it isn't half price for children."

"'Owever much I might 'ave desired that we should go together,—without a third party," said Mr. Burls, "I'm quite prepared to spread myself to the extent of another 'alf-crown—and I might even go further, in the course of the evening, if I felt in the mood. Bring the little lady along, by all means."

There was, of course, no question of asking permission, for the attendance of the Scrap; in Poverty Castle one did as one pleased, and no great harm came of it. Therefore Wicks made up her mind that she would wait until it was actually time to dress for this great

excursion, and would then spring the matter upon the astounded Scrap, and whirl her off on the very floodtide of surprise; and thus earn the everlasting gratitude of the child. To do her justice, Wicks was as much delighted at the prospect of allowing the Scrap to share the evening as she was on her own account, and she hugged herself during the day with the thought of what the Scrap would say and what the Scrap would do.

But disappointment, after all, awaited her. When, with the duties of the day finished, Wicks, in a flutter, was about to ascend to her room to dress for the great occasion, and made casual inquiries for "Miss Christina," it was discovered that that young lady was missing. What had become of her no one quite knew; and indeed, when one took into consideration the independent character of the Scrap, no one ever greatly troubled about her movements. Wicks waited as long as she dared, and put forth among the family such cautious inquiries as she could; but the Scrap was not in the house. Somewhat puzzled, and yet in no sense of the word disturbed, Wicks began to cast about in her mind to know what she could do to fill the vacant place.

Characteristically enough, the Pirate thrust himself into the business without invitation. Meeting the somewhat perplexed Wicks on

the stairs, he stopped before her and regarded her critically.

"I suppose you'll know me again?" said Wicks playfully, as she tugged at a white cotton glove.

"I'm not sure of that," said the Pirate. "Blow off my hatchways, Wicks—you're a howling swell."

"Glad you like the effect," said Wicks complacently. "I'm going out—and what's more, I'm not going alone."

"Running after somebody, I suppose?" suggested the Pirate.

"Nothing of the kind!" exclaimed Wicks indignantly. "But I've been asked by a gentleman to go to—to a place of amusement—and I'm going. To tell you the truth, I'm going to a music hall."

The Pirate heaved a sigh. "You're lucky," he observed laconically. "If I was bigger, and had any money, I'd go for the other chap, and take you myself—and I'd show you what life was, my sedate Wicks!"

"Well, you can come, if you like," said Wicks. "I didn't mean to take you, but the gentleman, who's been begging me on what you might call his bended knees for months and months' past to go, says quite casual, 'Bring a friend,' says he. So there you are—and you can take it or leave it."

The delighted Pirate decided to take it. Without more ado, he got his cap, and started off with Wicks—only pausing a moment to tell the mystified Fatima that "dark deeds were afoot," and that he did not quite know what time he should return.

Mr. Burls, waiting in his shop, had lighted a cigar several times, and had allowed it to go out; had made himself tea, and had allowed it to get cold; and in his best clothes was in a state of considerable tension and anxiety by the time the glorified Wicks burst in upon him. He was a little mystified at seeing the Pirate (who shook hands with him solemnly, and called him "old chap"), and evidently felt that in some way or other he had deceived himself, or had been deceived, regarding the sex of his second guest; but Wicks vouchsafed no explanation. In the course of the evening the dazed and bewildered Burls more than once addressed the Pirate as "Miss," greatly to that young gentleman's indignation.

And the Pirate, with his head thrust forward between the shoulders of those immediately in front of him, drew in the glorious entertainment greedily, and never lost a word or a movement. As the curtain came down on each turn, he drew back with a sigh, and straightened himself, and smiled at Wicks; but that was all. During the course of the evening an orange

was thrust into his hand, and he sucked it mechanically; certain sticky sweets were removed by him from a paper bag that was thrust under his nose; but he saw nothing and heard nothing beyond the stage. He grew hot, and he found the seat hard and uncomfortable; but those were minor matters that did not intimately concern him.

Had he noted exterior things, he might have seen that Mr. Burls, in the course of the evening, drew an arm slowly round Miss Wicks, along the back of the seat, until it rested immediately beneath her shoulders; and that the head of Miss Wicks inclined, at an easy and gentle angle, towards the head of Mr. Burls. More than that, he might have heard Miss Wicks whisperingly address Mr. Burls as "dear," and Mr. Burls respond with equal affection. But those things were not for the Pirate then.

What was for the Pirate, and for the two other people sitting with him, and for one grim old man behind, was that which happened towards the end of the evening. A board took the place of the number which had stood out at the side of the stage to indicate what was about to be done; and that board bore the words—"Extra Turn."

"Bound to be something a bit silly," said Wicks. "There's lots of 'em trying to shove

their way in, that knows no more about it than you do, Mr. Burls. What's that they're playing?" she asked a moment later "Sounds familiar."

"You ought to know that, Wicks," said the Pirate, speaking for the first time; "that's 'Squawky Sal.'"

"Of course it is," said Miss Wicks quickly. "Somebody wants to give me a good slap to wake me up."

Mr. Burls volunteered to perform the office, and there was a little scuffle between them, until a gentleman behind heatedly and earnestly expressed the wish that some people would stop "jolly well giddying about,"—upon which Miss Wicks instantly grew very stiff, and slowly wheeled round upon the daring one.

But whatever retort had been upon the lips of Wicks was never spoken. An interruption came from the stage, in the form of a burly gentleman, with an enormous expanse of shirt front, and holding between two fat fingers a large cigar, with a gilt paper band upon it, and in the other hand a brilliantly polished silk hat. This gentleman, advancing to the very centre of the stage and doubling himself in the middle three times, in a bow to the audience, made an announcement:

"Ladies and gentlemen," said the burly man, "I would desire to call your attention to the

extry turn about to be placed before your notice. The management of this 'all 'as been ever desirous of putting before its patrons not only the best talent that could be secured, at whatever corst, but likewise to infuse into that talent something of what I might call a novel helement. To-night I am placing before you one who will, I trust, in time become one of the child wonders of the 'ole civilised world. This child, who is of a particularly young age, will endeavour to entertain you to-night with an imitation of a celebrated singer in that song you 'ave all 'eard—not only in this all, but in other places—that celebrated song, 'Squawky Sal.' I claim your indulgence, ladies and gentlemen, and I am your most obedient!"

Amid shrill cat-calls and whistlings the burly gentleman doubled himself once more in the middle, and with a wave of his glossy hat disappeared. The band struck up the strains of "Squawky Sal"; the curtain rose; and there marched on to the stage—

The Scrap! There could be no doubt about it. There she stood—tight-lipped, blue-eyed, slim and straight, facing the great house, and waiting until the moment came when she could plunge into the song. Wicks knew her, and caught her breath, and rose from her seat; to be pulled back again immediately without ceremony by the incensed gentleman in the

row behind. Mr. Burls knew her, and rubbed his eyes, and looked at Wicks. The Pirate knew her, and sat staring, wondering if by any chance this was some remarkable dream, from which in a moment or two he must awake. Gideon Boatwright knew her, and his heart gave such a leap as it had not given in years. Then, with a flourish, the music struck the air, and the Scrap began.

She sang the absurd song with all her heart in it; the high, clear voice rang out over a house that sat in deathlike silence. She had every trick and every movement to perfection; she winked with her blue eyes to the right and to the left; she plunged into the chorus with a vigour that startled even that audience. To say that they rose at her would be to express the matter but feebly; something to her astonishment, but in no way to her unnerving, they took the chorus from her lips, and yelled it back at her, as surely it had never been yelled before. When she opened her childish throat and gave vent to that extraordinary squawk that was the very essence of the thing, they rocked with laughter; when she plunged into the dance, with her lithe young limbs twisting and turning, they howled their approval in a fashion that made even the Scrap turn giddy. And when, with a little flirt of her

skirts, she skipped off at the wings, it was like pandemonium let loose.

While the building seemed to rock with the uproar, four people rose from their seats and fought their way out of the building. Wicks was first, with the Pirate hard behind her; Mr. Burls came plunging after them. Nothing could have stopped Wicks then; she was like a whirlwind, as she fought her way through the packed audience, thrusting people this way and that, careless of whom she struck, so that she got through. The Pirate, not understanding in the least, and seeming to be still in a dream, followed in her wake; Mr. Burls came up hugely behind.

Gideon Boatwright followed, without any definite plan in his mind. He did not remember for a moment that he had no right to interfere; he simply saw in this business that the child who had twined her way about his heart-strings had in some extraordinary fashion been induced to perform before this gaping crowd; and that hurt him badly. More than all else, too, he acted by instinct in following the Pirate and Wicks and Mr. Burls; something must be done, and Gideon Boatwright felt that he might be useful.

That they got out without confusion would

be saying too much. A very babel of tongues surged up about them as they went; for the rest of the audience was clamouring madly for the Scrap's return, and those about Wicks and the rest were clamouring that the disturbers should sit down, or be turned out—or anything else that occurred to the excited minds of various people.

Wicks, however, got out into the open air, and with her procession behind her, frantically demanded the stage door. After some little delay, the way was pointed out to her; she raced round, and faced presently a big man in his shirt sleeves, who barred the way, and wanted to know what her business was.

"I've come for that baby!" she exclaimed.

"You'd better take your troubles elsewhere," said the man, with a grin. "And don't be making any disturbance, or I shall 'ave to demean myself so far as to 'elp a lady outside the door."

Mr. Burls, with the vague idea that the time had arrived when he must assert himself, stepped forward slowly and held a large fist in close proximity to the big man's nose; withdrew it, instantly and apologetically, and put it into his pocket. He performed the action again a moment or two afterwards; but it was so devoid of offence that the other

man simply looked surprised, and took no further notice.

"You've got to let me in!" screamed Wicks, thrusting herself forward.

Gideon Boatwright put her quickly on one side, and faced the man. "There's a child who has just performed here to-night—and she has no right to be here at all," he said. "I must see the manager—or whoever is responsible—at once. I want to take the child away."

He spoke in such a tone of authority that the man turned and whispered to a boy in the little office; the boy went off quickly down a corridor. Wicks, for her part, was so utterly astonished at the apparition of Gideon Boatwright, in that place and at that time, that she could only stare at him, with her mouth wide open, the while she leaned half unconsciously against Mr. Butls. The Pirate stood, ready for hostilities, with his fists closely clenched, and with a wary eye upon the corridor down which the boy had disappeared.

Gideon Boatwright took not the faintest notice of the others; they all stood in a gloomy silence while the shirt-sleeved man stared at them. In a moment or two the messenger returned, and, selecting Gideon Boatwright, delivered his message.

"You're to come this way."

Gideon Boatwright stepped forward, and the others moved with him. The big man put out a hand to stop them, but Wicks simply brushed him aside. Before he could interfere again, the four of them had moved along the corridor, following in the wake of the boy.

There seemed to be a great deal of noise going on in the narrow corridors, and in rooms opening out of them, with much running to and fro, and occasionally a sharp word of command from someone thrusting a head out of a door, and withdrawing the head again immediately. In the distance could be heard the strains of the band, coming to them in a muffled fashion.

The boy knocked at the door of a room, and opened it; they all plunged in hurriedly, to see before them a strange picture.

On a table sat the Scrap, with her long legs dangling; she was weeping hysterically, and yet giving vent to a little quick laugh of excitement in between her sobs. A very stout lady, in a huge picture hat and fleshings, was seated beside her, with an arm about the child's shoulders; and, standing with his hands in his pockets, and the cigar in the corner of his mouth, and his hat on the back of his head, was the man who had made

the announcement of the Scrap's appearance from the stage. "I tell you, my dear," he was saying, "you was simply wonderful—an' if there ain't a career before you I don't know my business. You've got to fetch your people up 'ere, an' there'll be a contract—w'ich is a simple bit of paper, with writin' on it, my dear, and conditions a child could understand—an' a glass of champagne to show we're friendly. Now, then," he broke off, "what do these people want?"

By that time Wicks, with one dart across the room, had the child in her arms, and was rocking and hushing her as though she had been a baby; and indeed she was little more. The Pirate was devouring the large lady in fleshings with his eyes; Mr. Burls was gazing round about him with an expression of the greatest amazement and interest.

"I have come for this child," said Gideon Boatwright. "She has no right to be performing here, and I should like to know by whose authority you have put her before this audience."

The large man removed his cigar from the corner of his mouth, and came forward at once rapidly to Gideon Boatwright.

"You ought to be a proud man, sir, that's what you ought to be," he said soothingly.

"If I'd got a child like that I shouldn't be running no 'all, an' makin' a loss every week, as I am a-doin', thanks to the salaries I'm expected to pay. No, sir; I should be smokin' big cigars all day long, an' riding in 'ansoms; that's what I should be doin'. She's a fortune, sir, and I congratulate you."

"You need do nothing of the kind," said Gideon Boatwright sourly. "And you haven't answered my question: By whose authority is she appearing at all?"

"Now don't be 'asty—and don't be nasty," pleaded the man. "I tell you there wasn't time; she fairly knocked me off my perch, in a manner of speakin'. Walked in 'ere as bold as brass this mornin', and said something about wantin' to do a bit for 'er family."

"Poor mite!" ejaculated Gideon, under his breath.

"Then, before I could stop 'er, she did 'Squawky Sal'; an' that done the trick. I've seen a few turns in my time, I've done a bit that way myself, when I wasn't so short in the wind; but I give yer my word I'd never seen anything like that. It was risky, because I 'adn't got a license; but there wasn't no time to do anything, and she wouldn't tell me who 'er people were, nor w'ere she come from. Mrs. Simmonds—that's Mrs. Simmonds on the table, though not 'er stage name," he added,

indicating the lady in the fleshings,—"one of the best, an' with little 'uns of 'er own,—Mrs. Simmonds made 'er up, and sent her on, and looked after er."

"Well, she's coming away now—and she won't be here again," said Gideon sternly. "It's all nonsense about having to do something for her family——"

The Scrap disengaged herself quickly from Wicks, and faced Gideon. "It isn't nonsense at all," she exclaimed,—"you know there isn't anyone else to do anything for them. *You* were going to do something, but you backed out; there was only me left. I had what Wicks calls accomplishments——"

"You 'ave, my dear—you 'ave," said the manager, heartily enough. "Now, sir," he went on, turning to Gideon, "let's be reasonable; I'm prepared to do the 'andsome thing. Name your sum—anything in reason, or out of it, an' I'm your man. You see, I just touch this little bell,"—which he did smilingly as he spoke,—"an' a boy will appear, and that boy shall fetch a little of the right sort—an' before you know w'ere you are, the cork 'll be out, and we shall 'ave a nice little contract all right and proper, subject to the license."

"You don't know what you're talking about," said Gideon roughly. "I tell you

t's a whim on the part of the child; she can lave nothing to do with such a place as his."

"Oh, indeed!" exclaimed the man, fast osing his temper. "And I suppose I may ake it that you, her father, lets her run about in' do as she likes- --"

"You're quite wrong; I'm not her father it all," said Gideon, a little lamely.

"I should hope not, indeed," said Wicks, niffing.

"I've got a proper sort of father at home— haven't we, Pirate?" said the Scrap, drying ier eyes.

"Then you bring 'im along 'ere, my dear, and tell 'im I'll make 'is fortune," said the manager eagerly. "And don't you let anybody you know nothink about try an' injure your prospects. You're a little wonder—that's what you are!"

"I know that perfectly well!" said the Scrap calmly. "And I'm sorry I cried—only those people shouted so that I got a little frightened. What was it you said I did?" she asked the lady in the fleshings suddenly.

Mrs. Simmonds laughed comfortably, and slapped her pink thigh. "I said you knocked 'em, my dear," she replied. "I on'y wish I could do 'alf as well with my little bit; but,

bless yer, I don't git such 'ands as that nowadays!"

By this time the boy had arrived, and had received his orders in a whisper; in an incredibly short space of time the manager was tapping a gilt-topped bottle persuasively and looking at the company generally. It took a great deal of talk to make him understand that the whole thing was impossible, and that under no circumstances could the Scrap ever be permitted to accept that engagement which would mean fame and fortune. In fact, the Scrap, being a little tired and a little frightened, was not at all eager for fame just then, and was glad to creep into the friendly arms of Wicks and to shut her blue eyes.

As Wicks moved towards the door of the room, and as the stout lady in the fleshings stooped for a moment and put the child's fair hair back from her face and kissed her, Gideon Boatwright, with a curious tugging of jealousy at his heart, stepped forward.

"Give her to me!" he said. "Let me carry her."

The Scrap opened her eyes and looked at him. "I don't want anything to do with you," she said calmly. "You're an old word-I-mustn't-say—and I hate you!"

Mr. Burls held out his arms; and strangely enough the Scrap crept into them, and

promptly laid her head on his shoulder and went to sleep. Mrs. Simmonds clapped her hands and laughed.

"That's right, my little dear," said the manager; "I see you know your friends. And if your big friend is related to you, and cares to look me up in the morning, we might talk business."

They went out of the place; and this time Gideon Boatwright walked slowly at the tail of the procession. No one took the least notice of him; and when the others had walked away, with Mr. Burls carrying the Scrap, and Miss Wicks hanging to the arm of Mr. Burls, and the Pirate trudging behind, Gideon Boatwright stood in the street in a fast falling rain—alone.

He remembered then the words the child had said to him—"I hate you!" And they seemed to cut into his heart like knives.

CHAPTER XII

A GHOST WITH A CLEAN FACE

It was Christmas Eve—and a bright, cold, clear Christmas Eve at that. A Christmas Eve good to look upon, but not good to be out in; and on the night that preceded it, and on part at least of the day itself, two men had spent the hours in the street. Those two men were Gideon Boatwright and Lope.

Let it not be supposed for a moment that they had spent the dreary hours together. Far from that: Gideon was a man of his word, up to a point at least, and he had made up his mind that he would not see Lope again. But though both had been banished at the will of the one, neither knew anything of the other's movements.

The Gnome, as an old campaigner, knew how to curl himself up in a corner of a seat and get what comfort he could out of that poor apology for a bed. Nor did the remembrance

that he was penniless greatly affect him; the day that was to dawn would surely bring something in the shape of food—perhaps even a fire and lodging. So he blessed the good gods that there was no rain, and slept peacefully—or at least as peacefully as other vagrants, homeless like himself, would let him.

With Gideon Boatwright it was a different matter. He had a house to which he could have gone; there was a bed, for which he had paid, in a fairly comfortable hotel waiting to receive him. His wanderings were quite voluntary—or rather they were forced upon him by the curious train of thought that had started in his mind. He had a battle to fight, a problem to work out; he knew he could not rest until the battle was fought and the problem solved.

It was paltry and ridiculous, and he strove hard to tell himself so; but it had started with that insane feeling of impotent jealousy, when a child had thrust him aside, and had said that she hated him. Under any other circumstances he would have been prepared to snap his fingers at the matter, as one that could not greatly trouble him; but he knew now that those words were in a sense a summing up, not only of the world's verdict upon himself, but of his own verdict too.

He had come across from the other side of the world, big with vengeance; and his vengeance had 'come down' to be a puny thing, wherein he warred against children. That was the bitter part of it: that it had been a vengeance nursed through years, and fostered, and made much of; and yet it had resolved itself into so poor a thing that he had been compelled to direct it against those who had never harmed him, and who were, above all else, too weak even to make any pretence of withstanding him.

He had blundered so bitterly that he knew that, to make any reparation now, he must lower himself not only in the eyes of those at Poverty Castle, but must lower himself also in the eyes of Lope—that creature that had been content always to cringe before him, and to accept his curses or his blows without question and without resentment. Always supposing, of course, that Lope could be found, and that the great world into which he had been so unceremoniously kicked had not swallowed him up entirely.

But, as a matter of fact, Lope had not been lost at all. After that one bitter night spent in the streets, the man, from old experience of his master, felt shrewdly enough that in all probability the Gideon Boatwright who had changed and softened once might change

and soften again; in any case, he was not likely to leave Quaker's Gardens without making some attempt, at least, to see the people again, or, if not that, at all events to clear up his own affairs there. And as the unfortunate Lope had no one to whom he could turn, and as also the habit of years was strong upon him, he determined that he would make one other attempt, on his own part, to see Gideon, with the hope that he might find his master, by good fortune, in that softer mood. So he went back, as the day was waning, to Quaker's Gardens.

Meanwhile, with the day before him in which to think over matters, Gideon Boatwright failed dismally enough to come to any resolution at all. Always he saw before him the Scrap, going through devious ways in some brave attempt to do something for the family, pathetically enough, and having the brightness of her blunted, as the years went on, in a struggle that must prove unequal. Perhaps he most adored the Scrap because of that latent devilry that was in her; there were possibilities in the child that appealed to the man; it hurt him still to think that she had said she hated him. Besides, what right had Burls with the child in his arms?

Wherever he went, this business of Christ-

nas held him, and reminded him of what, in his better moods, he had meant to do. In eating-houses, to which he went for food, the menu was different from that set before customers at any less glorious season; stained and dingy mirrors were decorated with holly and evergreens. The very waiters wore a more jaunty expression, and spoke of the season, and seemed to be looking forward to the morrow. Gideon Boatwright could not get away from it; and from failing to get away from it, found himself thinking, over and over again, of what sort of Christmas must be spent in Quaker's Gardens. He had a vision of the Scrap and the Pirate and the rest of them flattening their noses against the window panes dismally, and waiting for what could not happen.

"It's a poor prospect," he muttered to himself, as he strode along through the streets. "I've started the stone rolling, and within a day or two those to whom I dropped hints will be down upon them, and will strip them even of what they have. I know the whole business: they'll put a man in possession—and they'll sell them up. And I shan't be able to help them; I know their pride, and I know it would take them a long time to forgive me, or to forget what I have said; besides, they'd always be suspicious of me.

More than that, I couldn't bear that that baby should say again what she said to me last night."

The intolerable state of loneliness that had taken possession of the man, and that was with him through all the gay streets in which he walked, drove him more and more to think of that house—filled him with a longing to be in it again. Yet that was impossible, as he well knew; and in a whimsical moment he found himself envying that unknown man who was soon to be put in possession there, terrible though his errand would be.

And from that whimsical thought he got his whimsical inspiration. For the man in possession would pass into the place, and would sit there in the house itself, and would know all that they were doing. Would it not be possible for an altered Gideon Boatwright to go there under that disguise—to pass amongst them, and perhaps even to hear what they said of him who had ruined them, and to see what they did under the new misfortune that had apparently fallen upon them? The more he thought of that idea the better he liked it, and the more strongly he held to it, and allowed it to shape itself in his mind.

"I'll do it—I'll do it," he muttered. "If

in some fashion I can change my appearance, I may be able to pass among them unsuspected. I may be able to undo something of what I have done—may be able to find a way by which I can help them, after all, and win their confidence. But what is the way?"

He was so eager about it that he set off then and there to find Mr. Dowsing the lawyer; for although he did not intend to trust anyone with his actual secret, he felt he wanted advice. He would put a case to the lawyer; he would suggest that if So-and-so did a certain thing, was it not possible for Somebody-else to be placed in such and such a position. He would find out the pros and cons of the matter from Dowsing, and so would understand exactly where he stood.

But here disappointment faced him. Mr. Dowsing, with a very proper appreciation of Christmas, had closed his business, locked his desk, and gone off to the bosom of his family. An elderly clerk was in attendance, in case some such person as Gideon Boatwright, with no respect for the elderly clerk's feelings, should put in an appearance; and to him Gideon Boatwright put his case. It happened, however, that the elderly clerk resolutely declined, though with much polite-

ness, to suppose any such case at all, and threw a thousand difficulties in the way. Beginning to feel that it was all hopeless, Gideon in desperation put another case.

"Look here," he said, tapping the man on the breast and speaking earnestly, "I'm speaking of a matter that very strongly concerns a—a friend of mine. Suppose that friend, being in poor circumstances, hears a knock at the door, and then there walks in a dilapidated looking individual, who says he's a man in possession, having been put in for—for some debt or other. Would my friend question his authority?"

The elderly clerk scratched his chin thoughtfully. "Well, sir, it depends on whether your friend has many debts, or whether he is expecting someone to be put in possession," he replied.

"He's all over debts—and a man put in possession would be just what would be likely to happen to him," said Gideon.

"Then in that case, Mr. Boatwright," said the man, with a smile, "I should say that he would accept anyone who happened to walk in, and would not think of questioning their authority. Unless, of course," added the clerk,—"unless your friend should happen to be a keen man of business."

"If he had been, do you suppose he'd be in his present position?" snapped Gideon. "Good-day to you!"

He had his cue now, and he knew what to do, if once he could master that question of a disguise. He thought of every possible disguise that should hide his identity; but most of all he was afraid of the sharp scrutiny to which he would be subjected by the children. A mere disguise, from a point of view of a change of clothing, would not be enough; there must be a more radical alteration than that.

The sight of a hairdresser's in an obscure side street settled the matter. Gideon Boatwright stood on tiptoe, and looked over the collection of bottles and brushes and combs in the window, and saw that the shop was empty. He fondled his grey beard for a moment or two, and ran his fingers through his rather long grey locks; then he pushed open the door resolutely, and went in.

A tall and rather melancholy-looking young man came from a room at the back and surveyed the new customer. He had about him the air of one who practically says, "Nothing very interesting about this person;" he waved his hand gracefully towards a chair.

Gideon Boatwright sat down. "I want you to cut my hair—and cut it pretty close," he said.

"Very good, sir," said the young man, shaking out a linen cover.

"And shave off my beard and moustache."

The young man lowered his hands, and allowed the linen cover to trail on the floor. "Shave off beard and moustache, did I understand, sir?" he asked.

"Yes, yes; don't I speak plainly?" snapped Gideon.

"We always 'ave to be careful, sir," said the man pathetically. "There's many a person comes in 'ere, when not in a condition to know exactly what they *do* want, and asks to 'ave beards and such-like took off, as would be jolly glad if they 'adn't the next day."

"You're keeping me waiting for nothing," replied the customer. "I can go elsewhere, you know."

"Well, it's your 'air and beard, that's one thing," said the barber; and proceeded forthwith with his work.

"To make your mind easy, I may as well tell you that it is necessary for me to alter my appearance," said Gideon, and lapsed into silence.

The young man began to think deeply of what he had read in the morning papers, and in the papers generally for the past few days. Had there been a murder committed by a grim-looking old man with a long grey beard and abundant grey hair? Was someone wanted for an offence of any sort, who might by chance answer to that description? The barber saw for himself, in a new future, undying fame, and his portrait in the newspapers as the astute young man who had been the cause of laying a notorious criminal by the heels; his hands trembled in his excitement. However, he contrived to finish his work; and there stood up before him a new Gideon Boatwright, who would scarcely have been recognised by anyone who knew him.

"Makes another man of you, sir," said the barber.

Gideon did not reply; he walked out of the shop, and into the little street; looking back, he saw the young man craning his head round the door-post to get a last look at him. Then he turned into the broader streets, and set forth on his mission.

He bought an old well-worn, threadbare overcoat at a second-hand clothier's, and a dingy hat; and then, sure of his disguise,

made his way to Quaker's Gardens. And by that time it was dark.

He walked up and down a long time on the pavement opposite the two houses, debating whether after all he should take this step in just the way he had contemplated. It must be a shock to them to believe that a man had been put in possession; and yet Gideon Boatwright meant to compensate them for that shock generously enough afterwards. There seemed to be no other way in which he could enter the house: to go through his own house, and so into Poverty Castle by the door he had discovered for himself, must proclaim at once who he was.

He was to be assisted in a curious way. For it happened that, some hours before, Lope, having gone, as we know, back to that place where he might find his master, had been seen by Wicks toiling up and down in the bitter weather, flogging himself with his arms, and dragging his maimed leg painfully behind him. Wicks had beckoned to him from the area window, and the man had gone down, gratefully enough, to sit by the fire, and to tell Wicks, though grudgingly, something of what had happened to himself, and of how his master had flung him on the world. Miss Wicks had had a few caustic things to say concerning that master,

and she had said them with characteristic energy.

It happened that when at last Gideon Boatwright knocked at the door, with his purpose in his mind, Miss Wicks was extremely busy over some domestic matter; and she called out sharply to Lope to know if he would answer the door. Willingly enough the man rose, and went up the short flight of stairs to the little hall and opened the door. He saw before him a stranger; he hesitated, with the door in his hand.

But Gideon Boatwright, of course, knew Lope, and although for the moment he marvelled at seeing the man there, yet the chief thought in his mind was that this fitted in splendidly with his plans. He stepped quickly into the hall, and in a moment had clapped a hand strongly over Lope's mouth.

"Don't cry out, you fool; you know me? Don't say who I am — don't breathe a word," — which, seeing how firmly he was held, would have been a matter of impossibility for Lope in any case. "I'm not Gideon Boatwright at all; I'm a man in possession!"

"But, master——" Gideon had taken his hand from the man's mouth, and Lope faltered out those words in his amazement.

Gideon struck him sharply under the chin. "You needn't be afraid; I've come back to undo all I meant to do—before God, I have! Give me your hand, Lope," he went on, groping for it in the darkness,—"I ask your pardon."

He was in such a state of excitement, and so wound up to do the thing on which he had set his mind, that he was scarcely master of himself. Lope, not knowing whether he was on his head or his heels, went staggering and limping away along the hall, and so down into the basement; from which, in a moment or two, he re-emerged, followed by Wicks, with her apron to her eyes.

"Well," sobbed Wicks, leaning in an abstracted moment against Lope, "if this isn't the bloomin' limit! The Lord forgive me for such language; but language is the only thing for it. I don't know what you are," she went on, addressing Gideon, "whether you're taxes—or a bill of sale—or what you are; you look bad enough to be anything."

"Thank you," said Gideon, growling a little in his throat, the better to disguise his voice.

"Oh, don't thank me," retorted Miss Wicks fiercely. "I wouldn't be in your line for something. You'd better come downstairs, and

make yourself as small as you can, while I break it to them precious lambs that you've come after, like the wolf you are. Take him down, Mr. Lope, and keep an eye on him!"

The bewildered Lope staggered down the stairs, followed by this new Gideon Boatwright; so that it happened, fortunately for them, that they were alone in the kitchen. Having seen the door closed, Gideon came close to Lope and began to whisper his instructions.

It was a curious thing, and Lope remembered it long afterwards. Whether the barber had worked a miracle, or whether the beard and moustache had given to Gideon Boatwright an aspect more grim than he deserved, certain it is that this man who faced Lope, with eager words upon his lips, had rather a good face to look upon. The lines of the mouth were tender—almost pathetic; there were certain humorous little dots and dashes about the corners of it that had never been seen before. That barber must have had a fairy razor!

"I've come back, Lope, to help them; I feel I must," said the new Gideon. "All night and all day I've thought about them—dreamed about them; most of all I've dreamed about the little people."

"Yes, master," said Lope solemnly,—"one must dream about them!"

"You and I will plot and plan together, Lope; and you shall help me, because you seem to know so much more about it than I do," said the old man humbly.

"Master!—master!" Lope's head was bowed, and his lips were touching the hands of Gideon Boatwright.

"Listen! There are certain people in London who for money will do anything and everything that a man may want; will build up a fairy palace in a night, and deck it with fairy lamps—and fill it with fairy possessions. See," went on eagerly this strange man in possession—"here are bank-notes; and you know that there's more where they come from. Find these people, even though it be Christmas Eve; bring them down to this place; take them to my house; I leave the rest to you! Good Lope—faithful Lope!—you will know what to do."

Meanwhile, Wicks had carried her tale. Chadwick Merrigan and Mary knew that here was the end at last. They had felt, in their haphazard way of looking at things, that they might have scratched together some sort of Christmas for the children—some sort of pretence that should have been a little like the glorious festival itself. But that was

impossible now—because disaster had fallen upon them with a heavy hand, and they could but bow beneath it. It was a sad little company that gathered about the fire that Christmas Eve; for even the children knew of that Shadow that sat in a corner of the kitchen, and held the house in the hollow of its hand.

In the strangest way Lope had disappeared. Exactly what Lope did on that maddest of all mad nights he was never able afterwards to tell; suffice it that he rode in cabs, and flourished bank-notes before men who scratched their heads and doubted if a certain thing could be done, or at all events done in time. But Lope was indefatigable, and Lope was not to be denied. Even while the family gathered about its fires in Poverty Castle, and Gideon Boatwright turned that softer face of his to the fire in the kitchen, while Wicks sat at a little distance from him, all unsuspicious, and stitched at needlework on which her tears fell, certain vans rumbled into Quaker's Gardens, and stopped at the house next door.

All that night they worked; and such was the influence of Lope, and the seductive power of the man, that the men actually laughed while they worked. Just before the dawn, when Poverty Castle lay wrapped in slumber,

the vans rumbled away, and everything was finished.

Then Lope came back to Poverty Castle, and had his breakfast. Wicks being, in the kitchen, there was but a glance between master and man; but that glance was sufficient. In the strangest way, and quite unexpectedly, the man in possession chuckled.

Wicks flared round at him indignantly. "Did you speak?" she demanded.

"No, my dear," said Gideon Boatwright,—"I laughed."

"And a nice thing, I don't think, for a man at your time of life to be giggling about the troubles of others!" exclaimed Wicks. "And don't you dare 'my dear' me—or there's a gentleman will have a word or two to say to you that will astonish you. I could have a word or two to say to you myself, on account of those blessed lambs, if the words didn't choke me."

"You seem," said Gideon Boatwright softly,—"you seem to have been a good friend to them. Who knows, some day that may be remembered."

"I'm not sure that I want anything remembered just now," retorted Wicks. "Christmas morning, if you please, and about the worst ever I spent!"

There was a pretence at cheerfulness, a sag-

the morning; it being bright and fine, with a touch of frost in the air, the family went for a walk. The Old Man with the Pirate on one side of him and the Scrap on the other, created something of a sensation in High Street, Kensington, by walking along with his hat on the back of his head, singing "God rest you, merry gentlemen!" while the Scrap and the Pirate joined in. And so they came back, merrily enough, to see what by chance Wicks had managed to provide for dinner.

Now Wicks had remained in that kitchen with the man in possession and with Lope, and there had been a long, long consultation. It is not too much to say that when the family returned Wicks was light-headed; nay more, it might almost have been thought, by anyone who did not know Wicks, that she had been buoying herself up in a manner discreditable to a lady. But as a matter of fact Wicks had learnt the truth; she knew who this man in possession was; and she was literally hysterical with delight and wonder and fear all intermixed.

"What's the matter with me," said Wicks, leaning against the wall of the little hall and sobbing her eyes with her apron, "is that I haven't got any dinner. It's no use talking to me; I'm past it! If I should

'get worse, send round the corner for James Burls!"

Mary Merrigan gazed at Chadwick in speechless grief; Chadwick ran his long fingers through his hair, and stamped his feet, and did nothing. And then Lope came forward.

It seemed that Lope had a proposal to make. He could not, of course, say what his master's feelings would be, if that master ever returned; but Lope was willing to risk that. He had the key of the Magic Door; and that Magic Door could be opened. On the other side of it there was a dinner to be found; why should that dinner be wasted, because of the caprice of a sullen old man? Lope's suggestion was, with all respect, that they should slip through the Magic Door, on this day of days, and feast.

Chadwick Merrigan laughed, and nodded quickly at Mary; the idea was an excellent one. After all, Christmas is Christmas; let them face the penalty afterwards. Things were spoiling in the other house; let them make the most of a good opportunity.

So, with Lope leading the way, they climbed the stairs to that door; and it did not seem remarkable that the man in possession and Wicks brought up the rear of the procession.

The door was opened; and they went through, a little tremblingly, into that house that belonged to the man who was their enemy. Getting over that frightened feeling, and still led by Pope, they went down the stairs into the house.

Into a house transformed! What had happened in the night, while those silent workmen toiled, was evident now; the dingy house had been changed into a place of beauty. It was decked from cellar to garret with evergreens; its dingy walls were hidden with draperies; it was decorated throughout with lights that, when darkness fell, should presently peer out from corners in the most cunning fashion. And a great meal was laid on a gaily decorated table; and against every place at that table was heaped a little pile of gifts, addressed in certain fanciful nicknames—the Pirate—and the Scrap—and the Old Mar—and so on.

"Why—what's it all mean?" asked Chadwick Merrigan, staring round in bewilderment.

"Sit down—take what is provided, and ask no questions!" exclaimed the Gnome, in a tone of authority.

He rang a bell, and in a moment trim servants hurried in to wait upon the astonished guests. Gideon Boatwright, with a word of

Apology, had seated himself a little apart, and was watching; he wondered how soon the discovery would be made.

They were eating almost in silence, for there was so much to look at round about them, when the Scrap, who had been tearing open the many parcels beside her plate, glanced up suddenly and looked straight at Gideon Boatwright. She stood on the rail of her chair to have a good look at him; then asked a question in her quick, eager young voice.

"Who's that?" she asked. She had not seen him before in the house, and she was puzzled.

Gideon rose slowly to his feet, and stood there. With a wave of his hand he dismissed the servants; he was waiting, with a great fear, and yet with a great hope in his heart.

"Who's that?" asked the Scrap again.

"That, my dear," said Chadwick, "is an unfortunate man who has to do very disagreeable work; don't bother about him. Mr. Man-in-possession!" he added whimsically, "I drink your health!"

But the Scrap had slipped down from her chair and had gone swiftly round the table. She faced Gideon Boatwright; and he knew in an instant that she had recognised him. Before

she could speak he spoke himself, in an altered voice.

"Little maid!" he said, holding out his hands to her, "you said, when last I saw you, that you hated me—and so I've tried to make you love me a little. Think of me badly, if you will," he went on, as the others, starting to their feet, began to crowd about him wonderingly, "only believe that, like the good little boys and girls in the stories, I'll never do it any more!"

She took his hands and looked wonderingly into his face; and all his fears died away. "I'm glad you've done that to yourself," she said, probably speaking of the change the magic barber had wrought,—"I think you've got the kindest face I ever saw!"

So you see it all came right after all—just as it should do. And I may tell you that it is written that the Pirate shall go a-pirating on summer seas (respectably, by reason of the family) and so find scope for his restless wings. As for the Scrap—well, she rules it with a kindly rod of iron over a foolish old man, who chuckles at her devilries, and swears there's no one like her. And Shadwick Merrigan does exactly what he always wanted to do: he writes the

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